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THE MAGAZINE OF UPLAND BIRD AND WATERFOWL DOGS

An Outdoor Sportsman Group® Publication

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JOHN HAFNER



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# Hit the Dirt Road

**I**F you're like me, you've been counting down the days until the season opener since the final day of last season. Upland bird seasons are finally here and opening across the country! These are the days we live for.

If you're reading this magazine, it's most likely because you share the same passion for the uplands—and bird dogs with mouths full of feathers—as us. You're always looking toward the horizon, wondering what adventures it holds next.

Prior to moving to Utah to be closer to chasing the birds of the West, I lived in Ohio and Illinois. Every summer I meticulously designed my fall hunt schedule. I would plan to be on the road for two weeks to justify driving 20 hours across the country to hunt, and I'd load my car with camping gear, shotguns, shells, and dog gear. My Lab, Lincoln, and I would hit as many states and species as possible and usually skip Thanksgiving with family and friends to chase one more flush. Those two weeks would be the focus of my bird season, and if I were lucky, I could escape for long weekend jaunts to neighboring states later in the season. After a few years of this obsessive activity, my friends jokingly gave me the nickname "Road Warrior."

Not all of us can string together two weeks of vacation. Responsibilities at home keep most hunters from heading down the dirt road for more than a few days at a time, and some have less than that!

This issue of *GUN DOG* is your guide to how to become a short time frame road warrior. If you're a 9-to-5 worker and can pursue your passion only on weekends, read on. We've



KIM HUMMEL

broken down six regions you should point your truck toward this fall and where to find the most birds. Ben Brettingen, weekend road warrior extraordinaire, breaks down how best to utilize the short time you have to travel from your home to the field to fill your game bag and still get back for work by 6 a.m. Monday morning.

This is your season! The perfect opportunity to social distance yourself and hit the woods with your beloved bird dog—even if that time is only a couple of weekends here and there.

This is the time of year when my bird vest stays filled with shells and hangs at the ready. When my boots are always sitting near the door, and my over/under leans in the corner, ready to be grabbed at a moment's notice. Where I stop trying to rid my SUV of dirt, and feathers stay stuck to the carpet and line my dashboard.

And it's the time of year when my

blaze-orange jacket comes out of the closet, the fabric still coated with dirt, grime, and a bit of blood from previous seasons. It's bad luck to wash one's field jacket, you see. That fabric holds memories of long days spent hunting behind good bird dogs. Why wash them away?

I tip my hat to you! Here's to another season of chasing birds behind the best, most loyal hunting buddies we could ask for. If you're anything like me, the sound of the flush—beating wings rising from the brush—is what you long for the most until September rolls around once again. **GD**

See you in the wild,

*Kali*

Kali Parmley





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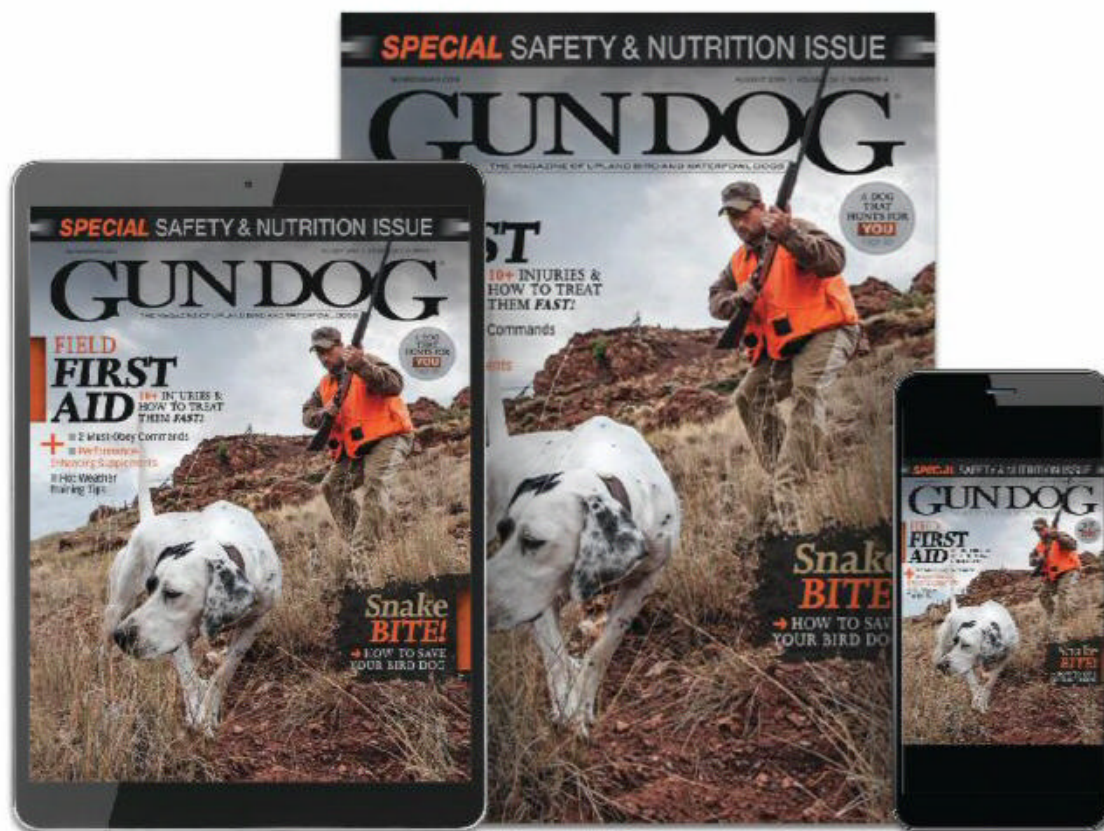
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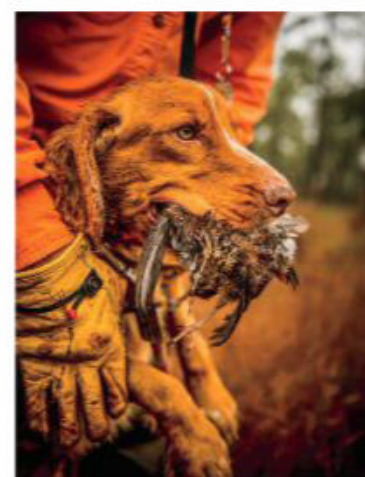
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**Deuce** is a three-year-old Labrador retriever, and this photo was taken on our training grounds in Georgia. The photo was taken by photographer, John Holloway. I'm not sure who was more wet—Deuce or John. —*Drue Poston, Thomson, GA*



**Clancy** is a three-year-old German shorthaired pointer from Pennsylvania. —*Luke Pisarcik, Canonsburg, PA*



**Chaos** is a year-old Wirehaired pointing griffon. She's a wonderful companion, and has an amazing drive for birds! —*Mike Morrison, Alberta*

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**\$230 | [huntredi.com](http://huntredi.com)**

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**\$300 | [finalrise.com](http://finalrise.com)**







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**\$190 | [proishunting.com](http://proishunting.com)**



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three roosters or four grouse, while a zippered accessory pouch and shell bag sit on the waist belt. An adjustable MOLLE system also sits on the waist belt to customize the placement of accessories. The vest is hydration-bladder compatible, and a water bottle holder and bottle can be purchased separately.

**\$299 | [pykegear.com](http://pykegear.com)**





# Bella...Be Good: Work Smarter, Not Harder

SOMETIMES, THE BEST WAY TO SPEED UP TRAINING IS BY SLOWING THINGS DOWN.

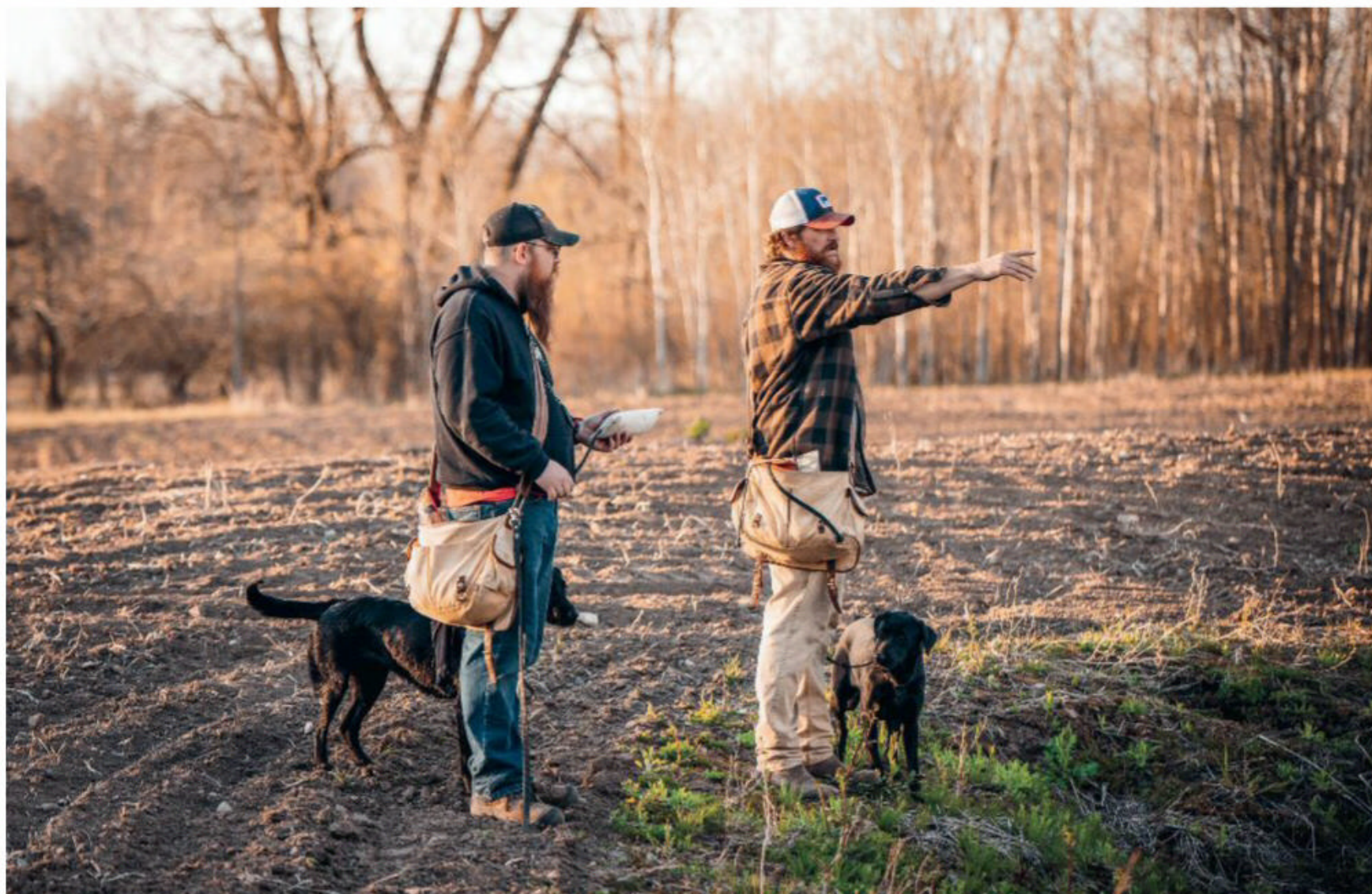
**B**ELLA celebrated her first birthday in April, and looking back on the last 10 months, I can't help but realize how quickly it has gone by. When in the moment, things seem to be standing still and progress can look minimal to nonexistent. But in the big picture, the time really does fly by and before you know it, dramatic changes take place.

Long before I was ever paid to train a dog, my living was made working

construction. I've always enjoyed building things, and there is a sense of satisfaction in recognizing physical changes and progress that takes place on a jobsite. When things went well, changes took place quickly. It was hard work, but also rewarding to see something literally develop and grow as you built it with your own two hands. Construction provided a much clearer understanding of what "hard work" really

meant. Three herniated and two bulging discs later, I also credit construction with providing me all the motivation needed in order to figure out how to start getting paid for training dogs.

When advancing Bella in her retrieve work, she hit a road bump. Rather than push harder, I gave Bella a break to refocus.





## BUILDING SUCCESS

After years of focusing on productivity, efficiency, and ways to speed things up in order to achieve success at work, that mindset begins to impact other parts of your life. I found myself analyzing everything from how many trips it took me to empty the groceries from the car to how I could put the dishes away faster and possibly run one less load per week. It just became normal to think that way about everything I did. It's one reason that I still struggle when it comes to remaining patient in training.

Construction is also where I first needed to truly understand the importance of the foundation. Without it, whatever we were building would undoubtedly fall down. The importance of a good foundation in construction is paralleled in dog training. What is not important is the means in which we achieve it. Simply working harder, faster, and doing more in training is a surefire way to find yourself in a lot of trouble, and likely frustrated. I do not predicate the amount of time or effort that anything takes when it comes to dogs. We can, and certainly should, do our best to help influence our dog's progress, but I had to accept that I am simply not going to be able to do more things and do them faster, regardless of how hard I worked at it when it came to raising a dog.

## BACK FOR MORE

Although the majority of Bella's training had gone smoothly to this point, we have run into some hang-ups along the way. One example came around the 10-month-old mark, when I was working on sending her back to the same area to pick up multiple dummies. I set the drill up as a memory, similar to what we'd been doing for months prior using single dummies. The change was I started to salt the area (place dummies in a general area, not on top of each other), using two or three rather than just the one. I don't "pile" dummies for my dogs, because I find this is too



**SIMPLY WORKING HARDER, FASTER, AND DOING MORE IN TRAINING IS A SUREFIRE WAY TO FIND YOURSELF IN A LOT OF TROUBLE...**

tempting for the pup to "switch." What I found was that Bella made the first retrieve without issue, but when sent back to the area for the second or third, she would fade or hunt short, quickly distracted by anything and everything along the way. She just didn't want to go back to the same spot, knowing that she had already made that retrieve and her job there was done. She lacked confidence and trust in me to go back to a place where she had already made the retrieve. In her mind, she had already picked it up, and she struggled

with the idea that there were more to be had—even though she watched me put them there when setting up the drill.

I chose this example because I recently finished adding several videos to the "Bella...Be Good" series on YouTube, sharing the struggle and my frustrations over a period of about two to three weeks. The issue showed up, which was cause for me to start focusing on the "fix." I was consistent and repetitious, which is always the formula in proper habit-forming. We were putting in the time and effort, doing all the



“hard work,” which was the fix in my concrete-pouring days. We made slow, gradual progress, breaking down and adjusting everything from the physical location to the complexity of each variable (number of dummies, distance, time delay, etc.).

Bella began to grasp the individual concepts quickly, but just about the time I thought she had it all figured out, the issue would suddenly show up again out of nowhere. She seemed to have the individual parts—we just weren’t able to put them all together. Frustrated is an understatement for how I feel in those moments captured candidly on film. Much earlier on in my training days, those were the times that I would turn things up and work harder. My thought was always to push through with increased repetitions and frequency—the two-a-day mentality. The trouble is that with an increase in workload, the results and improvements rarely came on the dog’s end. Instead, the only other thing that increased was

my frustration levels and blood pressure. Now you know the issue, and can maybe even relate to some of what you have experienced in your own training. But how do you get past it?

### BREAK TIME

The answer for me is the opposite of what I learned in construction. When it comes to the dogs, oftentimes the best way to speed things up in training is to simply slow them down. I know it sounds completely counterproductive, but trust me, it works. In this specific example, I ran into the initial issue because I was going too quickly, and we were missing some parts. We recognized it, went back to clean up each step, followed by slowly piecing them back together. We worked on it consistently over a relatively short period of time (a few weeks), until Bella was able to understand things broken down individually. When we tried to connect them, she still couldn’t tie the concept back together. So, we did what I recommend

every hard-working dog trainer do: We took a break. That’s it.

We stopped working on it altogether for about a week, to let her mind and body take a break from these concepts. We didn’t stop training; we just worked on unrelated things that she already had a solid grasp of. That helped build both of us back up mentally and physically from a confidence standpoint. After the short hiatus, we went back and set up the drill again. She nailed it, as if she had been doing it for years, and she has been very consistent going forward.

I appreciate good work ethic as much as anyone, but working smarter rather than harder with our pups is more often than not the answer. **GD**

...

**IF YOU’RE INTERESTED** in more of Bella’s journey to “be good,” check out the complete “Bella...Be Good” series on YouTube, as well as the @dogbonehunter and @gundogmag Instagram and Facebook pages.



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# LEMON-PAPRIKA SMOKED QUAIL

**W**ITH small birds, I typically shy away from methods that require longer cooking times. Quail take little time to cook through, and being lean, they can dry out easily. Grilling over direct, high heat was always my go-to method—until now. I’ve discovered the delights of smoked quail, and it’s the best I’ve cooked yet.

The little bit of smoke made all the difference in taste, and with the Greek yogurt marinade, the entire bird stayed moist and tender. I’ve used this method for grilling chicken and rabbit before, so why not quail? The acidity helped to tenderize the birds, while the longer marinating time allowed moisture and salt to penetrate. I’d marinate the quail for as long as 24 hours, but you can get away with overnight. The results were well worth the wait.

Quail is a finger food, so keep plenty of cold beer within reach of greasy hands.

## → DIRECTIONS

1. With kitchen shears, remove the backbone from each quail. Turn them breast-side up and flatten with the palm of your hand to break the wishbone, thus spatchcocking them. This preparation will allow the quail to sit flat on the smoker grates, and also help them cook evenly.
2. In a bowl, combine marinade ingredients. Transfer spatchcocked birds to a Ziploc bag and pour in the marinade. Massage the bag to evenly distribute the marinade, and then refrigerate for at least 8 hours but no longer than 24. Flip the bag occasionally. Take the quail out of the refrigerator 1 hour prior to cooking.
3. Preheat smoker to 275° Fahrenheit. Meanwhile, brush excess yogurt marinade off each quail and lay them on a cookie sheet or large plate. Sprinkle a small amount of salt over the quail. In a small saucepan, combine the basting sauce ingredients and heat until warm.
4. When your smoker is ready, brush each quail with the basting sauce. Lay the birds onto the smoker along with 2 halved lemons, then close the lid and smoke for 1 hour. After the hour and before taking the birds off the smoker, baste them again with leftover sauce. Serve immediately with smoked lemons on the side. **GD**

## SERVINGS: 4

Prep Time: 8-24 hours

Cooking Time: 1 hour

## INGREDIENTS:

- 8 whole quail, skin on
- 2 lemons, cut in half

### Greek Yogurt Marinade

- 8 oz. of plain Greek yogurt
- 8 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 tsp of dried oregano, separated
- 1 tsp of dried basil
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 Tbsp of olive oil
- 1½ tsp of kosher salt, plus extra

### Basting Sauce

- ¼ cup of olive oil
- ½ tsp of dried oregano
- ½ tsp of Hungarian paprika
- ½ tsp of dried basil
- ¼ tsp of garlic powder







# The Completion Factor

THE LAST 10 PERCENT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART.

**D**URING one of the hundreds of conversations I've had with a long-time friend of mine named Jack, he talked about a common problem he's seen in the house-building trade he has devoted his life to. He called it the "completion factor," and it goes like this: The job isn't finished until the last 10 percent is completed. In Jack's opinion, too many people would pursue a project, and then quit when they were within spitting distance of completion.

There is no better analogy than that for what I've seen in my years spent training dogs. I've watched inexperienced trainers spend months training their dogs in a focused, effective manner, only to then abandon their efforts when just a few more days of training would have set the dog up for a lifetime of success. In a few cases, these trainers got lazy. But more often than not, they quit too soon, simply because they just didn't know any better.

If I were to outline the entire training process for any dog—retriever, pointer, spaniel—a capsule description would read something like this: From Point A to Point B, the dog is shown a command, then encouraged to respond

to the command you've given. That's 90 percent of the training process. But the last 10 percent—the part that will get you to Point C, when the dog's training is complete—involves reinforcing what the dog has been trained to do.

## GENERALIZING

To prepare for that last 10 percent, you need to begin laying the groundwork much earlier. There's a name for this phase of training and it is called "generalizing."

> Train commands in different locations so your dog understands that the task is to be performed everywhere—not just in one spot.





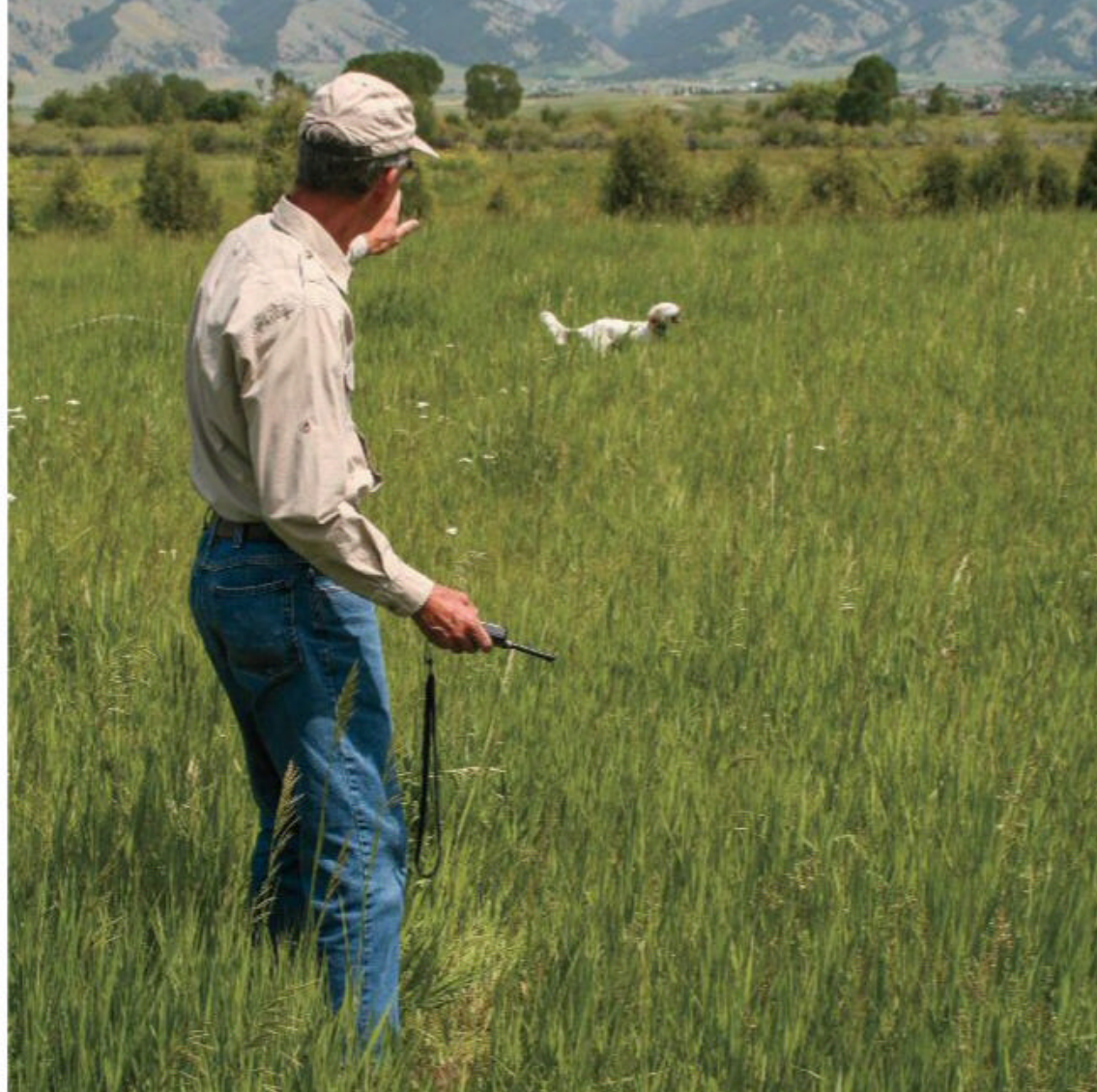
➤ As pointing breeds advance in their training, they must learn to obey commands even when not physically connected to you by a lead.

Let's say you're teaching your dog to whoa. I start my whoa training on a bench, giving the dog commands that are very easy for him to accomplish. When I think the dog has fully grasped what it is I'm trying to teach him, the benchwork is done and I then move the dog to the floor of my porch. Then, on a lead, I walk him back and forth on the porch, giving him periodic whoa commands and correcting him as necessary. When he's reliably obeying my whoa command on the porch, I repeat the exercise in my yard.

Those of you who have been through this step-by-step process have probably noticed that I'm omitting one crucial detail: refusals. Every time a dog is moved from one location to the next, he will almost invariably refuse the command he was executing perfectly just the day before, in a different location. George Hickox explained this to me. Dogs look at commands as being place-specific, he told me. If they obey a command in one location, they feel no particular compulsion to obey it in a different location.

In the decades I've been around bird dogs since George explained this to me, I've found what he told me to almost always be true. What that means as trainers, is that we have to train the same command in different locations in order for the dog to understand that the command he's being asked to perform stands alone, and is not dependent upon the location in which he's being asked to perform it.

Let's return to whoa training. Once I've moved the dog from the bench to the porch to my yard, making sure he's executing his commands correctly before each subsequent move, it's time to ramp things up. Now I put him on a 20-foot lead and let him cast about in front of me as I walk. When, as he's casting before me, he's reliably stopping on my



command, I let go of the lead and let him make bigger casts. Soon, he will learn that he has to obey my command to whoa, even if he's not physically connected to me.

When I've made it this far, my pup is well on the way to being reliably "whoa broke." But he's not there yet—not by a long shot. Since I train my dogs to be either steady to flush or steady to wing, shot and fall, birds are now introduced. And the generalizing process begins anew: Steadying the dog on a flushing bird, steadying the dog on a flushing bird with gunfire, and ultimately, steadying the dog on a flushing bird with gunfire followed by a thrown dead bird.

This is the point at which most trainers quit. The dog has been generalized, conditioned to live birds, and conditioned to finding or retrieving dead birds after the sound of gunfire. Many trainers would consider the dog good to go. But is he? Nope!

### THE COMPLETION FACTOR

Now comes the critical part: The last 10 percent, or the "completion factor." If you want your dog to reliably perform the commands you've taught him in the training yard, you have to reliably reinforce those commands on a hunt.

The problem with this approach, of

course, is that most people would rather hunt than train. I'm sympathetic. But think of it this way: A few well-placed corrections in the field could very well set your dog up to reliably obey your whoa command for the remainder of its life. Surely, a little bit of extra time devoted to training at this critical juncture is worth it.

So, here's what I've done with every one of the dogs I've owned, and what I've strongly recommended the owners of dogs I've trained do as well. For the first few hunts, leave your gun at home. Let one of your buddies shoot, or if you're hunting by yourself, let any birds your dog points fly away.

Once you've given your dog the command to whoa, have your buddy flush the bird and (hopefully) kill it. Reinforce either steadiness to shot or steadiness to flush, whichever you've trained. If the dog breaks anyway, drag him back, set him up again, and tell him whoa. Make him hold for a minute or two, and then release him. Some dogs get the idea quickly. Some don't. But they all get it sooner or later, so long as you're consistent.

Those last few days of reinforcing your training on an actual hunt were the completion factor; the 10 percent you needed to get the dog where you want him. **GD**



# New Birds? No Problem.

WITH A BIT OF PRE-TRAINING, YOUR DOG CAN EASILY HUNT IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT WITH A BIRD IT HAS LITTLE EXPERIENCE WITH.

**I**T wasn't that long ago that a good portion of the upland-hunting population focused solely on one species. Whether it was quail, pheasants, or grouse, hunters were less keen to travel, and more likely to stick with whatever opportunities they had close to home.

This just isn't the case anymore.

Traveling to hunt has never been easier, and truthfully, we are more aware of hunting opportunities near and far than ever before. This means you don't have to put 1,500 miles on your truck to step outside of your comfort zone, and instead might just have to drive a couple hours up north to go from pheasant sloughs to the grouse woods.

This is a good thing for all two- and four-legged hunters, but the latter will need a little help before you ask him to perform in a new environment, with birds he has little to no experience with.

This is where I see a lot of hunters lose their cool with their retrievers, which is a shame, because it's totally avoidable with the right training plan.

## UPLAND ADVENTURES

Many times, I've heard from folks who have trained and developed fantastic

pheasant dogs, only to set them loose in the big woods for grouse and woodcock and watch them struggle. The expectation is that the skills will transfer, but that's not how it works for most dogs, unfortunately.

For starters, at least with the pheasant-to-grouse example, the dog has likely

► Think about all the different styles of hunting you'll do with your retriever. Train for them specifically so your dog has the best chance of success right out of the gate.



TONY J. PETERSON





TONY J. PETERSON

spent its whole life hunting and training in grass. That's where birds live (in his mind), and so when he is expected to hunt in the thick woods for the first time, he likely doesn't understand what you're even doing there.

You need to train him in the woods, preferably with some pigeons or chukars, if possible. This not only encourages him to hunt in a new environment, but also allows you to work him close, considering he might be used to ranging out at pheasant distances, which doesn't cut it when it comes to grouse and woodcock flushes.

In a reverse situation, imagine asking an established grouse and woodcock dog to hunt roosters in a standing corn-field. The idea with any of this is that a dog needs an introduction to new

birds and new environments, at least to the best of your ability. You might not be able to exactly match quail habitat if you live in Michigan, or prime pheasant habitat if you live in Texas, but you've got to try. This is one of the reasons I try to remind dog owners that new and varied training environments, and exposure to new challenges, is a good thing throughout the dog's life.

Any retriever that has worked in vastly different environments from a young age, is going to be better off on a new type of hunt than a dog that has only

- To teach my dog that we have two styles of hunting, I like to take him on dove hunts where he isn't actively seeking birds, but rather sitting and waiting to be sent on retrieves.

ever trained in very specific habitats.

It's also a good idea to work up a sweat on those adventure hunts and get in where the birds live, even if you believe that's solely the dog's job. If

- If you can't get live (or dead) birds to train your retriever for new hunting opportunities, buy some wax-based scent to use with your dummies.



TONY J. PETERSON



## ► RETRIEVE

you're walking a two-track for grouse, the dog is likely to stay on the easy path as well—and probably won't find too many birds. But if you veer off the trail and work your way through the cover, the dog will follow suit. The same goes for pheasants in the cattails, quail in the mesquite, and on and on. Eventually, if you get the dog working where the birds live, the reason he is there will click into place quickly.

### DEAD BIRD, NOW WHAT?

Another common complaint that comes out of the new-bird crowd is a dog that won't pick up his first woodcock or grouse or whatever. At this point, after initial success in a new environment, I often try to get the dog excited and toss the dead bird a short ways. I want the dog to see we are going to have some retrieving fun, and that's usually enough to get them over the hump.

You can, long before you the season starts, work with dummies that are covered in new game-bird scent as well.

While I prefer to always try to get live (or dead) birds to run through some introduction work, that's just not possible for everyone. A dummy with some wax-based scent is your next best option.

### THROTTLE-DOWN HUNTS

Worrying about whether your dog will hunt in new environments is one thing, but worrying that your dog will want to hunt too much is another. When it comes to taking an established upland dog and asking them to dove hunt, or duck hunt, you're really asking a lot if you haven't trained for it.

To go from seeking out scent and flushes by running across the landscape to sitting tight and watching all of the action unfold from one spot is very unnatural for dogs. And it simply won't happen if you don't train for it. It's also not fair to ask a high-drive dog for steadiness when he hasn't been trained to be steady, because that's a sure recipe for failure.

I like to set up dove or duck hunts,

complete with spinning wing decoys and calls and whatever the hunt will include, to introduce my dogs to the reality that we have two styles of hunting. One that requires them to go out and find birds, and one that requires them to sit tight (and quietly) and wait for me to send them for retrieves. There isn't a dog out there that understands this difference without training, so you've got to anticipate what you plan to do with your dog and how they'll react to the new tasks.

This might sound like a lot, and it can be if you try to cram it into a couple of weekend training sessions—so don't. Take it slow and introduce your dog one new environment at a time. Think about all of the different places you'll hunt with your dog and the styles best suited to each, and then build a long-term plan to prepare your dog for them. With enough time and effort, you'll get your dog to the point where there isn't anything you can't ask of him hunting-wise, which is a beautiful thing. **GD**

# T&B DUAL

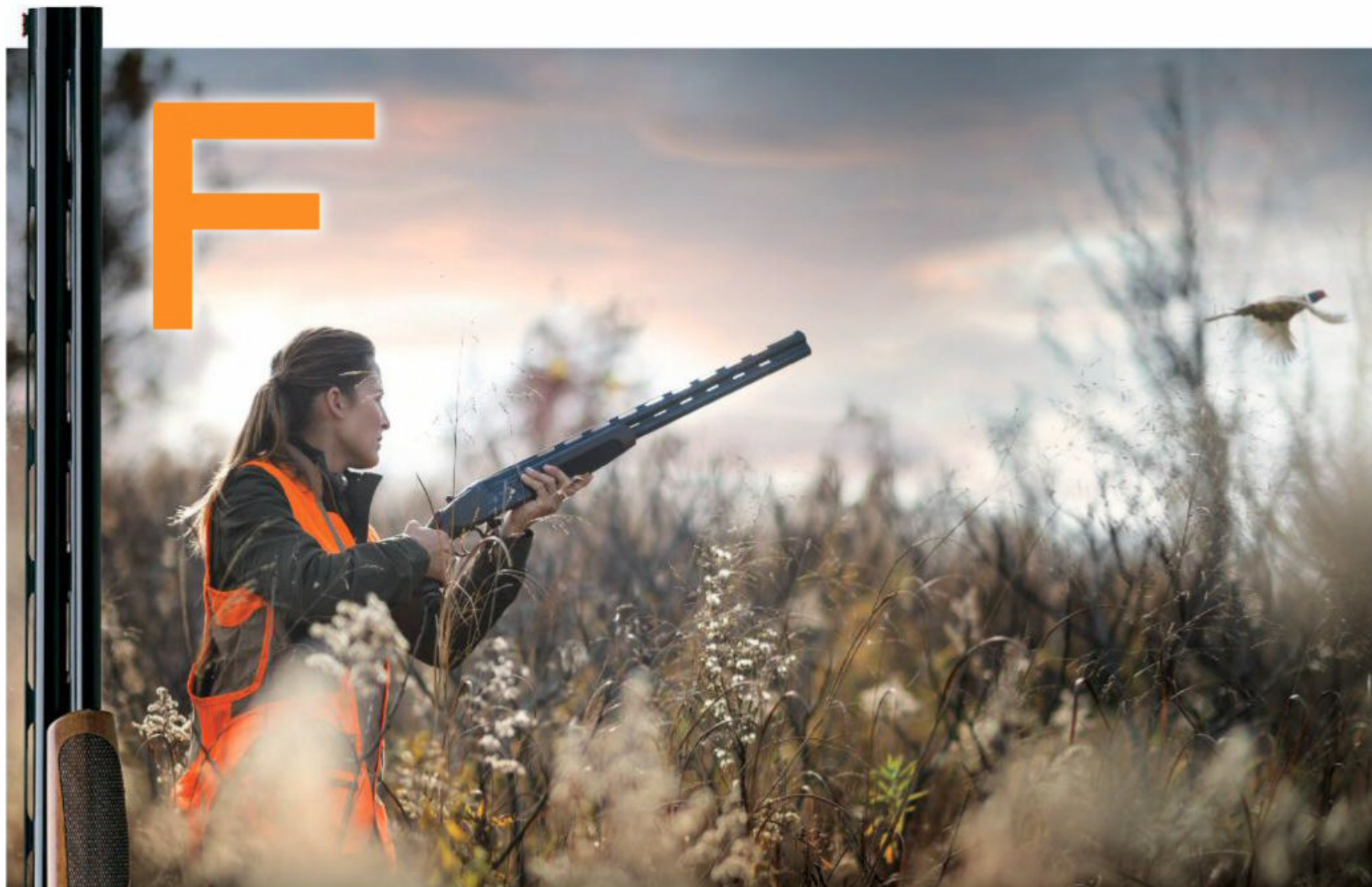
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# E-Collars and Spaniels

E-COLLARS ARE TO BE USED AS STEERING TOOLS, NOT SCARING TOOLS.

**I**'M not old, but I'm old enough to remember the years before e-collars. In truth, there were hundreds of them, years in which spaniels were trained to a high level using nothing but birds, check cords, and probably some pretty unhealthy tactics on the part of trainers. E-collars are not a necessary training tool for the flushing spaniel trainer. Tens of thousands of dogs have been trained for hunting and trials without them, and trained very well. That said, e-collars do have their place, and when

used correctly, and wisely, they can help streamline the training process.

These days, e-collars serve not only as training tools, but as exceptional tracking and locating tools, especially for pointing dogs in big country. It is still safe to say, however, that technology alone does not make them safe, or effective. In the hands of a trainer or handler who is not careful, an e-collar can flat-out ruin a dog beyond the point of recovery. Trust me. I've seen it happen all too many times.

## E-COLLARS IN THE SPANIEL WORLD

So, what is their place in spaniel training? Well, it is first important to understand that flushing spaniels are fundamentally different than retrievers or pointing dogs. I know that each dog is an individual, but I firmly believe that spaniels, on average, are "softer" than retrievers or pointers. They simply can't endure a heavy correction in the way those other dogs can. Additionally, a working spaniel is designed to stay close,



JERRY IMPREVENTO



➤ E-collars are used mainly to fine-tune recall and steadiness when training a spaniel.

and to work in very steady contact with a handler. The whole point of spaniel training is to incorporate their prey drive with their natural tendency to “check back in,” making their interaction with the handler far more regular than that of a big-running setter. The handler should not need a remote hand that can reach out over the horizon to correct a dog; good foundation training coupled with good breeding should keep that dog near enough to see and hear a handler, and understand what is being asked of him.

Where e-collars come in very handy in spaniel training is in the fine-tuning—the refining of skills that should be nearly perfect after basic training is complete. Specifically, this means during the recall, and more importantly in the delivery of a retrieve.

It is vital, though, that the collar is set and placed on the dog correctly. When starting a dog out on the collar, place it at the lowest level of intensity and test it on your hand, making sure both probes are touching the skin and working up the dial until you feel only the slightest tingle, then dial it back to the lowest level. Place the collar on the dog high up on the neck with the probes slightly off to one side of the throat, and then secure it tight enough that both probes are touching the skin. With the dog at heel, apply one pulse of instant stimulation. The dog will indicate that he feels the stim with a blink of the eyes, or a slight twitch of the ears. Move up through the levels until you get this response, and then STOP! This should be sufficient intensity to begin training.

Most often, issues with a retrieve are actually issues with recall. If a spaniel fails to come back to the handler on a straight line, a collar can be used to establish focus. In this case, the trick is to teach a dog to “turn off” stimulation by remembering that a recall is supposed

to be executed directly, without deviation. To reinforce this, the drilling is simple. As the trainer, put the collar on the dog, and put the dog at heel. Have an assistant place a check cord on the dog and stand off to one side, keeping the check cord loose. With the trainer 20 or 30 yards away, have the trainer issue the recall command. At the same exact moment as the command is given, the trainer should turn on continuous stimulation, keeping it on until the dog has completed half to three-quarters of the recall. The concept here is that the dog will learn to focus on the command and the desired behavior and will learn that the quicker and straighter he returns to the trainer, the sooner the irritating feeling goes away. The assistant with the check cord is simply there to help steer the dog back to straight if he starts to deviate.

The only other common application for the e-collar in spaniel training is to correct the dog that's steadiness isn't perfect. Remember, if your dog is breaking on birds, the collar is not the tool to resort to. Rather, you need to back up a step and go through the steadiness progression with a check cord, dead birds, wing-clipped birds, etc. But if the dog is simply twitchy and doesn't seem rock-solid on the hup when a bird flushes, an instantaneous nick on the collar can get him focused on the behavior that has been trained.

## FOUNDATION TRAINING AND ITS KEY TO SUCCESS

These uses of the e-collar with spaniels only come into play after significant groundwork has been done. The real secret lies in the foundation training, and the steady progression. Only then does a collar help refine the training, and only then can you be certain that collar work does not simply serve to confuse the dog.

Think of the collar like a burner on a stove. If the burner is low and your hand touches it, it will get your attention but give you time enough to compute what is going on. If you touch a blazing-hot burner, you will recoil in pain and confusion. The intensity must be sufficient to get the dog's attention, but not so much as to scare or punish. It is a steering tool, not a scaring tool.

Which leads me to my final point. As noted above, most of our training is done with the check cord, the lead, and live birds as the tools of motivation and correction. I'm a believer that these tools in the wrong hands can bungle the training, but will almost never ruin a dog. E-collars are a different beast. In the wrong hands, misapplied corrections or overly intensive corrections can and will break a dog in a way that is not fixable. For the sake of the dog, and your future together, seek professional advice when taking on e-collar training. **GD**





# First-Hunt Ready

STEPS TO ENSURE YOUR YOUNG GUN DOG IS READY FOR HIS FIRST HUNT.

**I**'M sorry to break the news to you, but it's too late for advice on what you should have been working on all summer to prepare your pup for his first hunt. So, let's go with Plan B: How not to screw up.

In fact, if you haven't at least conditioned your pup to the sound of gunfire or worked on basic obedience, you might be well-advised to leave your pup at home this go-round. Now, I realize I'm coming off sounding a little knot-headed here, but over the years, I've seen a bunch of problems resulting from ill-prepared young dogs being exposed to the potential extremes and adversities of hunting too soon.

What's the pup to think, when suddenly he's thrust into unpleasant weather (rain, cold, heat), briars and brambles that grab and stab, creeks to cross, big scary critters—and then there is the loud BOOM noise, leaving the pup frightened and wondering where it came from and why. A pup not well-prepared for all this may think he is much safer back in the truck.

## THE FUNDAMENTALS

I've seen this happen all too many times, so let's go over some fundamentals that I advise you to take into account before your pup's first full-fledged hunting trip.

**Age:** Your pup should be old enough

to have reached a level of physical and mental maturity to accept and endure the hunting environment.

**Socialization:** Your pup should be accustomed to traveling for long periods of time, and to being around other dogs and people. He should also be comfortable with the sights and sounds of working in various environments.

**Basic commands:** The more of the basics that are in place prior to actual hunting, the better. Heel, sit, and come are not only important in the hunting field, but also while traveling, airing, feeding, etc. Whoa should at least be in the works, so your pup understands check-rope pressure during bird contact.



DEAN PEARSON





**YETI** BUILT FOR THE WILD.

**YETI DOG BED**  
YOUR DOG DESERVES GEAR THAT'S AS DEPENDABLE  
AND DOWN FOR ADVENTURE AS THEY ARE.





➤ Utilize a check cord when prepping your dog for his first hunt. Focus on a pattern and move your pup to likely bird cover.

**Introduction to gunfire:** This is extremely important. Hunting a young dog that has not been properly introduced to gunfire puts you at great risk for serious problems. The sound of a shotgun blast is very loud, and if the pup is caught off-guard, it's pretty darn scary to him. Given this scenario, you may have months of work afterwards to help him recover from the trauma. Whereas when conditioned properly, your pup will already understand that the sound of gunfire is a cue to the fun and excitement of finding and retrieving game.

**Collar-conditioned:** If you plan on using an e-collar, it is very important that the young dog has been collar-conditioned well in advance. He should already clearly understand commands, and be comfortable dealing with and escaping pressure from the e-collar.

"Training hunts" are how you move your dog along in the process of preparing him for a full-fledged hunt. In fact, this is how we build and prepare our young dogs for actual hunting. Our goal over time, as commands, obedience, and socialization progress, is to move

from the backyard to the hunting field, and eventually on to the "real deal."

You can help your pup gain a bunch of in-field experience while working alone with him. Don't even carry a gun. Focus on pattern by using a check-rope for control to move your pup to likely cover, while also working on basic commands. A trip to a hunting club is a great idea if you don't have access to public or private ground. This is a great way of conditioning and socializing your dog to the hunting environment, while also reinforcing commands.

### FIRST HUNT SUGGESTIONS

Assuming you've covered the basics before the big hunt, I still suggest you go for a few short hunts initially, and work with a friend who can do the shooting. This way you can check-rope your dog and be sure he sees the bird go down, reinforcing steadiness and his understanding of the gun noise.

Young dogs are better off not getting into a lot of birds on their first few hunts because you'll find too much bird contact can erode training/obedience to the point of losing control. It's best

the pup has time to calm down and regain his composure after each contact, and time to think about lessons and what he gains by yielding to learned commands and reinforcement pressure.

This is why I recommend you not get involved in what I call "army hunts;" lines of pheasant hunters sweeping across fields, with a young dog. Instead, go off with a friend to hunt cover along creeks and ditches, and small patches of heavy stuff where you'll likely encounter birds. By doing so, you'll be able to slow down on the pup's confusion, while safely controlling each encounter with a bird to your advantage.

With the short check-rope, you can choose when to let your pup go for the retrieve, and when he has to stand and watch another dog's retrieve—honoring another dog represents the level of obedience your young dog will require as he advances.

I like to let a young dog run and hunt. Sure, he'll goof up and bump a bird or two; hopefully, you're not out there to kill every bird on the farm. Remember, you're out there to help your dog experience and enjoy the hunt, and to develop the skills necessary to become a great dog.

Young dog or old, always be open to opportunities to reinforce training during the hunt. When hunting is slow, use that time to check and strengthen your stationary command—whoa or sit—with voice and/or whistle. Make him do it, and reinforce with the e-collar if necessary. Then, if you have time, work on your recall command with both voice and whistle, followed by heel to your side and sit. If you and your dog are able to successfully complete these four commands while faced with the real-life distractions of hunting, you're well on your way to many productive and enjoyable days afield. **GD**





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# Ode to the 16-Gauge

AFTER TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF OBSOLESCENCE, THE 16-GAUGE IS MAKING SOMETHING OF A COMEBACK, AND THAT'S GOOD NEWS FOR UPLAND HUNTERS.

**O**F all the hunting stories I've heard in my life, a few stand out clearly in my memory, and one of those involves a 16-gauge. My friend Chad McKibben's father, Bobby, recounted the story of coming home to his Ohio farm after work one day, grabbing his Winchester Model 12 16-gauge, and walking a fencerow behind his house. Shortly into the walk, Bobby jumped a covey of quail, and with the speed and precision of a master pump-gun shooter, took down a limit of birds in a matter of seconds. Perhaps it was Bobby's vivid storytelling ability that made the tale so memorable—you could practically feel the earth shudder as the covey burst into flight when he recounted it—but at that moment, I knew I had to own a 16-gauge.

Perhaps that story also stuck in my mind because it was a recollection of time passed. Bobwhite quail numbers

have seriously declined in our corner of Ohio, and so have the number of upland hunters carrying 16-gauge shotguns. Why, I wondered, had the 16-gauge faded in popularity? Surely other hunters had stories like Bobby's, and surely there were still some well-oiled and well-worn 16-gauges with memories yet to be made.

## **SLOW FADE**

The 16-gauge enjoyed its peak popularity in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It's not at all surprising that the gauge was so popular since the 16 is, at least on paper, a near-perfect bird gun. Its bore diameter—.662"—is the same diameter as a lead ball weighing 1 oz. (16 of those lead balls would weigh a pound, and now you understand how shotgun gauges are determined). The 16-gauge was practically made to shoot 1-oz. upland loads and can go heavier, and



that allowed it to compete with the 12-gauge in a lighter, easier-to-carry package. A true 16-gauge gun on a scaled action weighing 6 lbs. is a deadly upland gun indeed. It's got enough wallop to knock down late-season roosters, yet it's light enough to carry all day long. A 16 isn't too much gun for dove and quail, but with standard upland ammo, it will outperform a 20-gauge without much added recoil or gun weight. Why, then, aren't we all carrying 16-gauges?

Good question, and there's a clear answer. In 1926, the rules of skeet were being officially cobbled together, and the 16-gauge wasn't listed in the rule-books. The 12-gauge was, and so were

➤ The 16-gauge is an ideal upland gun. It carries like a 20-gauge, but hits like a 12.

the 20 and 28-gauge, and the .410 bore. That regulatory cold shoulder shouldn't have been a big problem, except for the fact that lots of shooters wanted to shoot skeet. And because skeet shooters shoot a lot more shells than the average upland hunter, ammo companies were compelled to appeal to the high-volume skeet shooter. That meant the 12 became the standard competition load, and the 20 was viewed as the lighter option for less recoil. Shotgun ammunition profits thrive on volume, and 16-gauge shells weren't selling by the case. There were still upland hunters clinging to the 16, but there was another major setback: Wild bird populations were declining.

With the 16-gauge already a little punch-drunk, a few additional shots landed. First, 3" shells (and later 3½" shells) came into vogue. There weren't any 3" 16-gauge guns or loads immediately, and regulations that required nontoxic shot had the potential to finish off the 16-gauge once and for all, rendering it a footnote in shotgun history. A few shotgun manufacturers offered up 16-gauge guns for the diehard fans,

but many of those guns were built on 12-gauge frames. The 16's marketing cry had always been that it carried like a 20 and hit like a 12. Those 16's built on larger frames carried like a 12 but hit more like a 20, and that's not a good marketing shtick.

The 16-gauge might have died if it weren't such an excellent upland load. While perfectly suited for 1-oz. loads, it can also be loaded up to 1⅛ oz. and even 1¼ oz. In guns weighing around 6 lbs., these loads offer stiff but manageable recoil. That truly does strike a superb balance point between the 12 and 20-gauge, and upland gun par excellence. It's suitable for every type of wild bird from quail, doves, and preserve pheasants up through sharptails, prairie chickens, pheasants, and sage grouse. The 16 is a gun that hits hard enough to knock down chukars and Huns, yet is light enough to carry into the country where they live.

#### WHAT ABOUT WATERFOWL?

You won't see many camo 16-gauges in a duck blind, but the mild-mannered





16 is a functional waterfowl gun, nonetheless. Federal, Hevi-Shot, Kent, Browning, Remington, and other companies offer nontoxic 16-gauge ammo, and if you have a modern gun that's capable of handling it, Hevi-Shot actually offers a 1¼-oz. 16-gauge load that exits the barrel around 1,300 feet per second and hammers ducks and geese. All modern 16-gauge shells are 2¾", and that limits the versatility of this load. However, with lots of 15/16-oz. nontoxic loads like Browning's new BXD Waterfowl and the heavier (or should I say Hevi-er) magnum nontoxic ammo for large birds at extended ranges, you've got a wide selection of modern waterfowl loads that will handle anything from teal to geese. Would I make a 16-gauge my dedicated honker, swan, or crane gun? Nope. The 12-gauge is far more versatile for waterfowl, and a 20-gauge with 3" loads can essentially match the 16's best-performing nontoxic ammo options. But the 16-gauge is a sound—if not quite so versatile—waterfowl gun.

### TARGET SHOOTING

One rub against the 16-gauge has always been that it's just not a suitable target gun, and that clay game rules handicap 16-gauge shooters by forcing them to compete against folks with 12-gauges. I wouldn't want to buy a case of 16-gauge target ammo every week, but quite honestly, there are very few competitive 12-gauge shooters who are snapping that many caps in a seven-day period. Shells for the 16 are more expensive than 12 and 20-gauge shells, but the difference in cost is not that great. A box of 25 16-gauge target loads can be had for around \$10 to \$12 if you shop around, and while that's a couple dollars more than you'll pay for 12-gauge ammo, it's still within the budget for the casual trap, skeet, and sporting-clays shooter. If you're competing to win clay target games, stick with your 12-gauge. If you break a few targets on Wednesday nights with your friends to tune up for the hunting season, then the 16-gauge will work just fine.

It's a chore to find 16-gauge target

ammo on stores shelves in some areas, but if you order ammo online, your options open up quite a bit. Browning offers a 16-gauge 1⅛-oz. load in the BPT line, and there are affordable 1-oz. field and target loads available from Fiocchi, Remington, and Aguila that'll cost about \$10 a box.

### FIREARMS OPTIONS

A few years ago, Browning rereleased a modern version of the A5 Sweet Sixteen, and it's a sweet gun indeed.

►With a bore diameter of .662", the 16-gauge has the same diameter as a lead ball weighing 1 oz., making it practically made to shoot 1-oz. upland loads.







With its reliable Kinematic Drive recoil system, glossy walnut stock, and classic humpback profile, the new Sweet 16 is beautiful and reliable. And at just under 6 lbs., it is easy to carry. Browning got the balance just right with this gun, and the A5 16-gauge is among the liveliest upland guns on the market and sells for \$1,739.

Browning isn't the only manufacturer in the market, Franchi unveiled their 16-gauge Instinct SL over/under a few years ago—a lightweight field gun with an aluminum-alloy receiver, A-grade walnut stock with Prince of Wales grip, red fiber-optic front sight, and screw-in chokes. I chose to carry the Instinct SL 16-gauge on an Idaho mixed-bag hunt last year (read about it on page 46) in some rugged country, and I never once regretted my choice. The Franchi weighs 5 lbs., 12 oz., and yet it offers a magnum punch on par with a 12-gauge. While standing atop a ridge of lava rock, I flushed a covey of chukar that winged their way into the canyon below. All but one, that is, because I managed to swing ahead of the last bird in the covey and the 16-gauge dropped him mid-wing-beat. The Instinct SL over/under is

comparable in price to the A5 at \$1,729.

Stevens offers their 555 shotguns in 16-gauge now as well, and the upscale Enhanced version comes with an engraved alloy receiver, interchangeable chokes, and very good wood for its price of \$829. CZ also sells a 16-gauge version of their Redhead Premier over/under for just under \$1,000, and Tristar's new Trinity stackbarrel is a Turkish-made 16-gauge over/under that's available for \$685. Of course, there are plenty of used 16-gauges on the market as well, and some of these can be had for a very modest price. In its prime, Winchester's Model 12 was a popular choice for 16-gauge enthusiasts like Bobby McKibben, and as a result there are a handful of Model 12 16-gauges available in used gun stores from time to time. I picked up a Winchester 120 16-gauge pump for a song, and it's a functional field gun that's fun to shoot—and one I'm not afraid to get dirty in a duck blind. Browning released a couple 16-gauge SHOT Show Citori guns last year, too, including the Citori Feather Superlight 16-gauge, which weighs just over 6 lbs., and the throwback 525 Field 16-gauge. If you see any of these guns on the store

➤ The 16-gauge is versatile and perfectly capable of taking down upland game ranging from quail to roosters.

shelf, you'd better act quickly, though. There are more 16-gauge fans than you might imagine and the 16's exclusivity makes it appealing to collectors.

#### WHY THE 16?

I won't tell you that the 16-gauge is a dramatically better gun than either the 12 or 20-gauge. If that were the case, the 16-gauge would have long supplanted the other two. But the truth is, the 16-gauge is a functional firearm that balances weight, recoil, and shot payload effectively. It's good for a lot of things, but it's great for upland hunting. Would I have remembered Bobby McKibben's quail-hunting story so vividly if he'd told me he was carrying a 12-gauge? That's hard to say. But what I do know is if you're an avid upland hunter, the 16-bore is a superb choice. **GD**





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# The Social Life of Dogs

HOW TO USE THE SOCIALITY OF DOGS TO HELP IN TRAINING.

**M**UCH of the training of dogs for the last 40 or so years has been based on the idea that because the dog is descended from wolves and wolves hunt as a pack with an alpha pair calling the shots, dogs also hunt as a pack with the owner, the alpha of the pack of two. The word “alpha” denotes a dominance and because dogs are related to wolves, training of dogs is predicated on trainer dominates trainee—the dog. There is a lot of faulty

reasoning in this approach, primarily because feral dog packs don’t base their leadership on dominance, but rather the leader is the dog with the most friends.

Research on Mexican dump dogs by Raymond and Lorna Coppinger found that fighting was limited to two dogs competing for some resource, usually food, or to territorial disputes between packs, and not related to leadership of the pack. The leader of a pack of feral

dogs has the charisma to attract followers and that makes him/her the leader. Wolf packs usually consist of a dominant male and his mate (the leaders of the pack), with the remainder of the social

➤ You and your dog need to be on the same page at all times—that stems from good leadership on your part.



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➤ Just like humans, dogs can read people. They choose instantly who is to be trusted and who is not.

group being closely related sub-adult offspring and the current pups.

The wolf social structure revolves around predation, primarily the killing of large prey and opportunistic scavenging. Feral dog packs are scavengers, with some killing of small prey. Dogs have always survived on the garbage of humans; their social structure revolves around scavenging as opposed to predation. This factor is necessary for domestication, and therefore, trainability.

Dogs are social animals, as are people. They do not do well in a “lone wolf role.” They hunt only when we take them hunting, and almost never hunt as a predator for food for themselves, but rather depend on us for food. For our gun dogs, the closest and most preferred social relationship they have is the dog/human bond—one dog, one person. A hunter and their dog would hardly describe a pack, but it does perfectly describe a “social relationship.”

### **SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

There are several types of social relationships important to a dog's life: Care-Dependency is giving, asking for, and receiving food, shelter, and general satisfaction of needs; Mutual Care, which could also be called Cooperative Dependence, is giving and getting mutual needs satisfied; Leader-Follower is the giving and receiving of direction in all things; Dominance-Subordination is the forceful or aggressive assertion of rights and needs, e.g. territorial defence; Mutual Avoidance is all parties avoiding confrontation; Sexual is the courtship, mating, and all things related to reproduction.

The first three are the most neces-

sary social relationships between dogs and people. The last three are dog-dog, with the exception of Dominance-Subordination, which is mostly between dogs with occasionally dog-person interaction needed to correct a willful misdeed—a “bad boy” admonishment won't cut it—or to prevent a dangerous or harmful situation.

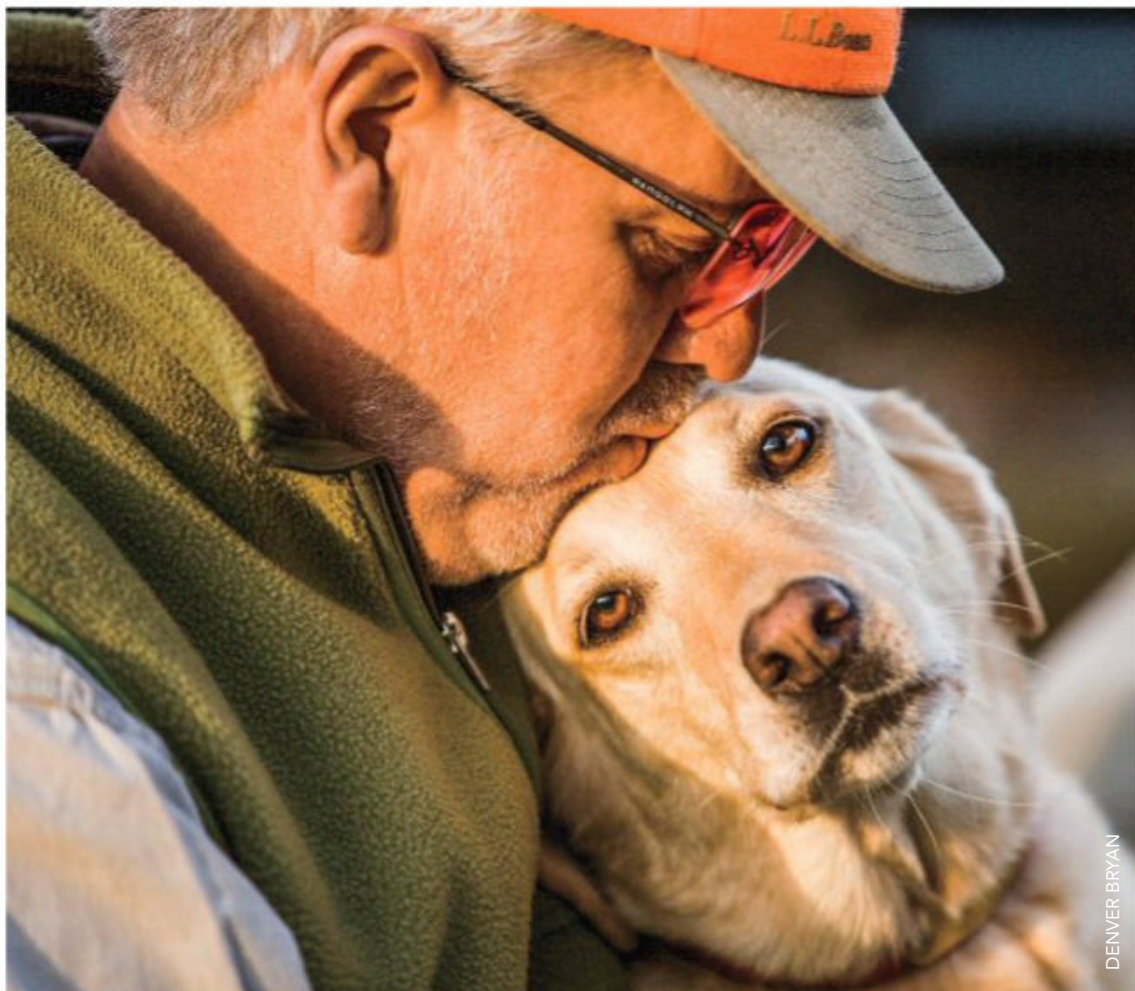
could tell generous from stingy people. Dogs allowed to see people who let dogs win tug of war and people who always had the dogs lose, when given the opportunity to interact with both groups, unanimously chose the people who let dogs win at least some of the time.

These experiments demonstrate that dogs can recognize individual people,

## **FOR OUR GUN DOGS, THE CLOSEST AND MOST PREFERRED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP THEY HAVE IS THE DOG/HUMAN BOND—ONE DOG, ONE PERSON.**

In any social relationship, communication is the essential element. This is where dogs have the advantage over all other animals. Dogs have the unique and uncanny ability to communicate with us, both sending us messages and being able to read what we transmit to them far better than most of us realize. Research was done to determine whether dogs could distinguish between people who were generous with treats for dogs and people who weren't, simply by letting the dogs observe the people interacting with other dogs. The dogs

and they can also distinguish between generous and stingy—preferring the generous and most caring persons over the others. Dogs also make instant decisions on whether a person is or is not to be trusted, whom to like or dislike, and which handler they are willing to work with and which they are not willing to work with. Dogs make these choices based on what they can read in a person. We all have met people who we instantly liked, and others who we instantly distrusted. Dogs can read people as well, if not better, than people



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can read other people.

Knowingly or not, we use dog-people social relationships in shaping our dog from the day he is a puppy arriving at our home, until his life is over. The Care-Dependency relationship is our first and total commitment to a dog. We provide food, shelter, training, exercise, and vet care, and our dog is dependent on us for these things. The better the job we do of providing for his needs, the better the rapport between the two of you and the better the dog, all other things being equal.

### UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIPS

The Leader-Follower relationship is essential to the dog. We use it to show the dog what is wanted, and if you have built the rapport, he will do his best to give you what you want of him. But, being the leader does not mean dominance. Remember the feral dogs where the leader is the one with the most friends, the one that is liked best? The

Care-Dependency relationship sets the stage for the Leader-Follower relationship. Rapport makes the leader; domination does not. The dog acknowledges your leadership by wanting to follow your lead. The dog depends on you for strong, well-structured leadership. Dogs prefer knowing what is coming next, and they don't like surprises or do well in confusion. Leadership is you and your dog not only being on the same page, but also reading the same paragraph. Confusion builds anxiety in the dog, and even a little anxiety is too much. This doesn't mean the regimen is doing the same boring thing at the same time every day. We need to vary things in the interest of learning for the dog, amongst lots of other things. But, we also need the dog to feel comfortable and confident in his role, calmly looking forward to the job to be done as though he is saying to you, "Hey, no problem." That is what leadership is made of.

The Mutual Care relationship, or maybe more appropriately called "coop-

erative dependence," is what hunting with a dog is all about. Unspoken communication makes this social relationship work. It is the two-way line that tells the dog what you want him to do, and that he is above and beyond what you tried to train him to do. It is also the cornerstone of good training, based on how well you learned the role of a good leader and he of a good follower of your lead. It is as though you and your dog are able to read each other's mind. It is in chest-high grass when he stands on his hind legs to check on your whereabouts, at the same instant you are wondering where your dog is. It is what is meant by the word "cooperation" on the score card. When this social relationship is solid, it is a whispered, "thank you," in both directions at the end of the day. **GD**

...

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# SOUTHERN IDAHO SLAM

THE HIGH-PLAINS DESERT OF SOUTHERN IDAHO IS A BIRD HUNTER'S PARADISE, BUT CONNECTING WITH HUNS, CHUKAR, AND CALIFORNIA QUAIL OVER THE ROUGH TERRAIN IS A DAUNTING CHALLENGE.

BY BRAD FITZPATRICK





# A

## **At one time, Idaho was bird hunting's best-kept secret, but word has finally spread.**

The Gem State offers more upland species in more varied terrain than almost anywhere else in the country, and that variety has garnered attention from serious wingshooters. Of course, that doesn't mean you'll have trouble finding a spot to hunt in Idaho—with more than 34 million acres of public land, there are certainly prime patches of hunting property in the state that go untouched season after season.

The south-central portion of Idaho is home to some of the state's most productive upland hunting, and the region's expansive sage flats and basalt cliffs are at the heart of Idaho's growing bird hunting industry. Areas around the Snake River from the Jarbridge Mountains west to the Owyhees harbor good populations of California quail, chukar, and Hungarian partridge—the three species that make up the unofficial “South Idaho Slam,” and with luck and perseverance, it's possible to take all three species in a single trip.



## EARLY SUCCESS

Shooting a slam wasn't the primary objective when *GUN DOG* Editor-in-Chief Kali Parmley, our friend Ben La Londe, and I rendezvoused outside Mountain Home in October 2019 for a buddy hunt. The goal of that trip was simply to hunt wild birds on public land, in some of the most majestic upland bird habitat in the country. But Idaho has a way of prompting hunters to push their limits—to see what's above the next rise, or scramble across a basalt slide along the rim of a canyon because you heard chukars there in the morning.

Our quest began casually. Ben and Kali had chosen a place to camp on BLM land, and with the sun already setting the first evening, we decided to fan out across the breaks and valleys to see if we could find birds in the hours before our hunt officially began the next morning.

The public land we were hunting wasn't exactly flat, and the short-grass hills rose several hundred feet all around us. But by Idaho standards, it wasn't demanding terrain. While driving deeper into BLM land, a flock of Huns ran across the gravel road and flew over the ridgetop on the western side of the road. We continued on for

a quarter-mile, and then stopped the vehicle near a low depression, planning to backtrack over the hills to the area where we'd seen the birds. Kali's retriever, Lincoln, led the way.

Turned out we'd underestimated just how far we'd traveled since the point where we had flushed the Huns, and with darkness fast approaching, we decided to circle back toward Kali's vehicle. As we approached, Lincoln moved off into a patch of green, spring-watered grass on our left side.

"He's getting birdy," Kali said. Ben and I flanked the green growth to the left, while Kali remained on the right side. Lincoln's body language made it clear that if there weren't birds in that patch of green grass, there had been very recently.

I saw a flicker of movement in the grass—not a flush, but the head of a bird moving away from the dog. Before I could call that to the attention of my companions, a covey of quail exploded from the grass, drumming their way

**THE GOAL OF THAT TRIP WAS SIMPLY TO HUNT WILD BIRDS ON PUBLIC LAND, IN SOME OF THE MOST MAJESTIC UPLAND BIRD HABITAT IN THE COUNTRY.**

➤ Gordon setters, Tallgrass Pistol Pete (left) and Tallgrass Miss Molly (right), make a fine brace of dogs to chase upland birds across southern Idaho with their owner, Tom Loy.









IDAHO HAS A WAY OF PROMPTING HUNTERS TO PUSH THEIR LIMITS—TO SEE WHAT'S ABOVE THE NEXT RISE, OR SCRAMBLE ACROSS A BASALT SLIDE ALONG THE RIM OF A CANYON BECAUSE YOU HEARD CHUKARS THERE IN THE MORNING.

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➤ A covey of California quail surprised the hunters on their first evening trekking across the breaks and valleys of Idaho's vast amount of BLM land.

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directly across my face as they departed. I shouldered my Franchi Instinct SL 16-gauge, knocked one bird down, and then swung to catch another. I hit the second bird with my other barrel. I heard Ben's shotgun bark behind me, and by the time that I turned, he was hoisting a quail above his head in triumph—his first California quail. I located my first quail, while Lincoln brought my second bird to hand, his tail wagging with pride.

With three birds down, we decided to collect the vehicle and return to the place where we'd flushed the Huns. By the time we reached the point where we'd last seen the birds, the sun had almost set. There was time for one push across the hilltop and into the next valley.

We hadn't been out of the car more than three minutes, when the Huns

erupted from the grass. I wasn't in position for a shot, but Kali and Ben both fired, and Kali dropped a bird. We thought about chasing the rest of the covey farther into the dry hills, but it was simply too late. Plus, we had birds to clean. In less than an hour, we had taken two of the three primary upland species in the area. Idaho had quickly lived up to our expectations.

### **PUSHING THE LIMITS**

We didn't expect the surprise snowstorm that blew in over the Owyhee Mountains just after first light the following morning. The weather forecast that morning called for clear skies, little wind, and lows in the 40s. But by the time we met up with our friend Tom Loy of Tallgrass Gordon Setters, dark-grey clouds with long veils of falling snow had shrouded the hills.



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Kali and Ben were camped just on the edge of the snow, which turned out to be more of a minor nuisance than a major setback. Still, I wasn't prepared for wet, cold weather, and it almost seemed to be punishment for our early success.

The early morning squall didn't last long, and it didn't seem to slow the bird hunting either. Tom's Gordon setter, Pete, went on point at the upper end of a narrow drainage, but despite leaving the birds ample room, the Huns flushed wild before Lincoln could locate the birds for a flush, and before Kali was in place for a shot. We made a wide loop around a ridgeline, and when we returned, Pete fell on point again. The birds flushed well ahead of us once more, arching over the hilltop and out of sight.

➤ South-central Idaho is prime upland bird habitat, with expansive sage flats and basalt cliffs.



By midday, the low, gray clouds began to move out and a sliver of blue sky appeared. The calmer weather seemed to relax the Huns, and Ben, Kali, Lincoln, and I chased a covey into a narrow valley. We were within 20 yards of the birds when Lincoln flushed them, and from her position high on a ridge, Kali managed to fold one of them before it crossed the valley.

The arid climate, lava rocks, and long miles had taken a toll on our hunting dogs. After lunch, Tom retired his dogs, Pete and Dolly, and Tom's friend Randy brought his Gordon setters for the afternoon hunt. Our next destination didn't produce any birds, despite the abundant sign. The year before, Tom's dogs pointed three coveys of Huns on that same patch of ground in a span of less





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than 20 minutes, but the reality of upland hunting in big country is that you find the birds where they are at the moment—and sometimes you don't find them at all.

The last patch of public ground we hunted that day was a long, gently rising hill encircled by sheer rimrock cliffs. The grass flats on the hill had produced Huns, and there were chukar there, too. But those birds spent most of their time in the rough, rocky country on the cliff's edge. The plan was to sweep the field to try to locate a covey of partridges, and when we'd reached the summit, we'd switch tactics and dive into the rocks to find chukar.

By that time, the sun was high and the sky was cloudless, and the cold, wet morning was a forgotten memory (except, of course, for the slosh of water in our boots). We pushed five-wide across the field, heading up toward the summit with Randy on the edge of the rimrock, and Tom and Ben on the left flank. Kali and I hunted the middle, and with three dogs making wide runs across the field, we hoped we'd find birds there. We didn't.

Near the crest of the hill, Tom's dog, Dot, grew birdy, pausing as if to point before then moving forward with her head low and eyes transfixed. Kali, Ben, and Randy had circled to the right and were standing on the edge, while Tom and I walked the last step to the peak and looked down over the drainage.

Dot was still acting as though she might fall on point. The sound of scratching on rocks caught my attention, and when I looked down the cliff, I saw a pair of chukar standing in the open.

"Birds!" I shouted, and that was enough to send the covey of a dozen chukar bursting off the slope. The birds banked to the right, and I fired on the

last one. The shot crumpled the cliff-jumper, and it fell from the sky. I tried for a second shot, but by then the covey was long gone.

Tom and the rest of our team continued around the ridge, while I eased down through the rock scramble to find my bird. I'd seen the chukar hit and knew the bird dropped, but despite my



➤ Idaho offers varying terrain and weather conditions. An early morning snow left dogs and hunters cold and wet, but hours later, sunshine and blue skies dried them out.



➤ *GUN DOG* Editor in Chief, Kali Parmley, and her dog, Lincoln, with a Hun in the bag on their first evening in Idaho.



best efforts, I couldn't find any sign.

I followed a grid pattern, moving left and right and farther out into the valley in the area where the bird had fallen, but it simply wasn't there. That seemed impossible. It was as though the earth had swallowed my chukar, and in the end, that wasn't far from the truth.

I was standing on a pile of broken lava rock, contemplating how I could have lost the chukar in such open country. As I reset my bearings for the fourth or fifth time, I looked down and saw my bird. It had fallen into the rock pile upon which I was standing, and all that was visible in the depths below was a single red leg and part of a wing. As I bent down and reached for the chukar, I hoped that there weren't any snakes in that hole and chuckled to myself.

With the bird in my bag and a story to tell the others, I started climbing. Before I reached the top, I heard another volley of three shots. The others had found a group of chukar farther around the rim, and Kali connected with one of the birds as it winged across the valley. By the time I reached them, Lincoln was at the end of a very difficult and technical blind retrieve, having located Kali's bird 200 yards across the drainage by following her commands.

By the end of our first official day of hunting, I had taken a chukar and quail, Ben had a brace of Huns, and Kali had a chukar and a Hun—a good haul for wild birds on public land. At dinner, we discussed what the next day might bring. I just hoped it wasn't snow.

### SLAM SURPRISE

The final morning of the hunt started out in one of the most magnificent wild bird hunting areas I've ever seen. We were hunting along the edge of the Snake River, which at that time of year is a stopover point for huge numbers of waterfowl. Beyond the river, a series of jagged peaks rose out of the landscape to our southwest. The river's edge was a jungle of head-high brush, and it was one of Tom's favorite quail areas.

We made a wide sweep through the brush, following narrow deer paths while listening for beating wings. Quail hunting can be quite dangerous if all the members of your party aren't on the same page. In dense cover with low-flying birds, hunters can lose track of one another's position and accidentally shoot someone. I trusted our group, and we paid close attention to each other's location, refusing to shoot any birds that weren't clear and safe. Not long into the push, I flushed a single bird and shot it.

Lincoln was footsore after a full day of hunting the rough Idaho terrain (not

to mention the few hours our first night) and needed rest. I stayed with him at the truck—not an easy task since 110-pound Lincoln wanted to barrel back into the brush, injured feet or no injured feet, at the sound of each gunshot. And, as Tom and his Gordon, Pete, and Kali and Ben worked their way through the brush, there were a number of shots.

When Kali appeared through the dense brush, she had a wide smile on her face. She gave me a thumbs up—she'd taken a quail in that jungle of brush, and in doing so completed her slam. I released Lincoln, who ran excitedly to both greet his handler and inspect the bird she grabbed from her game bag.

Idaho truly is a bird hunter's paradise, but that doesn't mean the birds are easy to find. Scoring on all three species in a short hunt requires good dogs, and lots of hiking and climbing. And shooting two of the three primary species gives me a reason to return to the Gem State, not that I really needed a compelling reason to go back. **GD**



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DESTINATION:

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The

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THE BIRDS ARE  
CALLING! THESE  
MUST-HUNT  
DESTINATIONS  
ARE HOTSPOTS  
FOR MIXED-BAG  
OPPORTUNITIES  
THIS FALL.

BY TONY J. PETERSON

# Uplands





DESTINATION:

# The Uplands



DEAN PEARSON



**As I get older, I've started to realize that it's the lies we tell ourselves that are the most dangerous.**

This might involve our physical fitness, or how we treat others. Or it might simply be what we believe to be true about hunting opportunities—specifically, public-land opportunities.

I don't know how many times I've set out for a random state with my Lab and a loose plan on how to find pheasants, grouse, sharptails, etc., only to have locals tell me that the upland juice in their neighborhood is not worth the squeeze.

Almost, without question, it is.

It might not be easy, but it is possible to have a great hunt in a new state,





provided you go into it after conducting some research and you set your expectations for realistic outcomes. If you do, you'll find some states you've never thought about that are worth your time and effort. To help you along, we've compiled a list of some of the best under-the-radar options out there.

### **STUBBLE FLUSHES & THE SANDHILLS SPECIAL**

It's no secret that Nebraska is making a run on its neighbor to the north as far as upland hunting goes. Prairie chickens, sharptails, bobwhite quail, and pheasants can all be had on public land—and occasionally on the same trip—as I've discovered a few very special times. The prime destination for most nonresidents is the Sandhills region, where prairie chickens and sharptails dominate. Bessey National Forest is a solid choice for anyone who gets claustrophobic hunting anything that doesn't offer somewhere in the neighborhood of at least 90,000 acres.

Focus on the prairie dwellers, of

course, but don't forget about the state's roosters, either. According to Upland Habitat and Access Program Manager, John Laux, Nebraska's ringneck population is nothing to scoff at. And while most hunters set their sights on CRP and obvious grassland, there is another type of public offering that can hold limits of roosters. "Nebraska generally enrolls up to about 40,000 acres of tall wheat and milo stubble into the Open Fields & Water Program annually," Laux said. "These fields are generally harvested with a 'stripper head,' which depending on the quality of the crop, can provide not only great roosting cover, but loafing cover as well." While most hunters are targeting nearby CRP, roosters stick to the stubble and often use grassy waterways, plum thickets, and any additional cover they can find.

Laux notes that the best place to find some "stubble birds," is where most of the state's rooster action is concentrated—the southwest. Having spent a lot of time hunting Nebraska, I'd only add this: There are pockets of birds

► Multiple states offer solid pheasant populations and enough land to find limits on public dirt.





➤ If you want to head east to hunt ruffed grouse, head to the northeast corner of Vermont for a healthy population.

throughout the state, and while the early season is tempting, the late-season is a great time to find birds, and without the competition.

#### PEACHY BOBWHITES

Spend some time around quail hunters in the South, who had the benefit of hunting during peak bobwhite numbers, and you'll hear plenty of bemoaning about the current state of affairs. It's true that we aren't experiencing any high-water marks for the most common

quail subspecies, of which the mortality rate any given year can come close to 80 percent.

Doom and gloom aside, there are bright spots out there, including opportunities available right now in the Peach State. State Quail Coordinator, Dallas Ingram, had this to say about Georgia's prospects this season: "We've been seeing an increase in quail populations over the past couple of years, with several warm winters and favorable spring rains that have set the state up

## GO GUIDED?

While public-land hunting is all the rage, there are still plenty of reasons to choose an outfitted upland excursion. But according to Patrick Flanagan, owner of Border to Border Outfitters ([bordertoborderoutfitters.com](http://bordertoborderoutfitters.com)), there are a few things you need to consider before you book a hunt.

"No matter the bird species, I would only choose an outfitter who answered all of my questions," Flanagan said. "Confidence and professionalism out of an outfitter are a must, and if you're not feeling the right vibe during your initial phone call—pass." Flanagan guides hunters for everything from Minnesota grouse to Arizona quail, and he encourages anyone who is interested to really consider what they want out of a guided hunt, and to conduct enough due diligence to ensure the hunt is just right for the individual.



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for great recruitment.” Ingram also notes that the Georgia DNR has put a lot of effort into improving habitat, which is starting to bear feathered fruit.

When asked where he’d send out-of-staters looking to find a couple of coveys, he mentioned several options, but pointed to the bottom left corner of the state as a starting point. “Southwest Georgia has always been a hotspot for quail hunting, with lots of great land in the Red Hills and Albany areas. There are other good opportunities across the Upper Coastal Plain as well, from Dooly to Laurens and Burke Counties.”

### GREEN MOUNTAIN GROUSE

Vermont wildlife biologist, Chris Bernier, can rattle off quite a few reasons why someone would load up their dog and drive to Vermont, most of which hinge on the state’s grouse numbers. “We have an abundant and widespread population of grouse, and are blessed with an abundance of actively managed public lands ranging from the 400,000-acre Green Mountain National Forest to the highly diverse state-owned parcels,” Bernier said. “Folks coming from out of state can find birds almost anywhere, but they would probably be best served to check out the northeast corner, particularly Essex County.”

Vermont’s upland hunting doesn’t begin and end with grouse, however. According to Migratory Gamebird Biologist, David Sausville, there are plenty of resident and migratory woodcock to be had, depending on the timing of your trip. “If you show up in October, you’ll hit the primetime for woodcock throughout our state. Over the last few years, we’ve had a freeze-up in November, which has pushed the birds out early, so that might factor into hunt planning.” Sausville also says that anyone who is looking to have little to no competition and loves the challenge of late-season grouse, should consider a trip in December, when most hunters have packed up their vests and given up on the season.

## GO-TO GEAR

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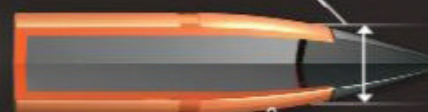
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# DESTINATION: The Uplands

## SOONER STATE MIXED BAG

Although their game bags are likely to be anchored by bobwhites, Oklahoma hunters might also add a blue quail, or even a rooster, to their dowry before the day is out. According to Oklahoma Upland Game Biologist, Tell Judkins, most visiting hunters start their search with bobwhites on the mind. “Like many states, we are seeing decreased populations of many bird species, due primarily to a lack of suitable habitat, habitat fragmentation, and use of exotic or improved grasses. That being said, you can still hear the familiar whistle of bobwhites across the state.”

Judkins adds that from 2018 to 2019, 83 roadside surveys indicated a slight rise in numbers, and at the time of this writing, the 2020 seasons look promis-

ing. He also says that adventurous hunters should look to the northwest corner of the state if they plan to hunt public land. “Several WMAs in northwestern Oklahoma offer up good quail possibilities, including Cimarron Hills, Cooper, Beaver River, Packsaddle, and Optima. We also have our Oklahoma Land Access Program (OLAP) properties, which offer smaller parcels to the willing upland hunter.”

As someone who has spent a lot of time roaming the vast grasslands in western Oklahoma in search of all types of critters, I can safely say that there are quail to be had here, and that the Sooner State is one of the friendliest to nonresidents I’ve ever hunted.

## WISCONSIN BIG- WOODS BONANZA

Upland Wildlife Ecologist, Mark Witecha, advises anyone thinking about

➤ No matter what state you are hunting, find the right habitat and you’ll find birds.



JEFF MOORE



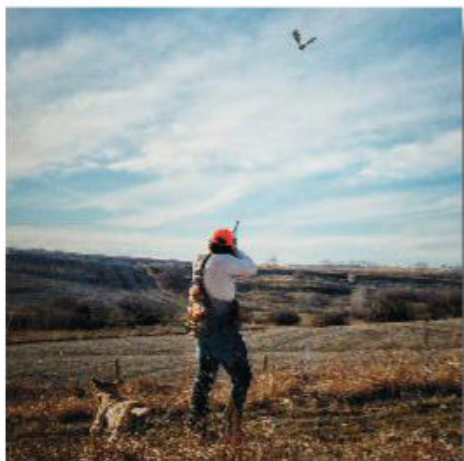
➤ Wisconsin offers a great woodcock migration. Plan to hunt the Badger State in October to bag a timberdoodle.

a Wisconsin upland trip to check out the state's Field and Forest Lands Interactive Gamebird Hunting Tool (FFLIGHT), which is available on the Wisconsin DNR's website. He also proudly states, "Wisconsin is a premier destination for ruffed grouse and woodcock, with millions of acres of actively managed public forest providing extensive habitat that supports strong populations of both species." As someone



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## DESTINATION: The Uplands

### Need a Bird Dog?

Hunting behind a dog and seeing them work is what makes upland hunting that much more exciting. But recognizing that sometimes getting a dog from a breeder just isn't in the books for you can make it seem like you'll never have a gun dog of your own. That's where K-9 Adoption and Mentoring Outdoors (KAMO) comes in.

This nonprofit organization rescues dogs in the sporting industry and matches them with families to find their forever homes. Dogs rescued by KAMO range from middle-aged to retired, and young dogs that still have years of hunting in them. KAMO offers both adoption or fostering opportunities for hunters looking for a dog.

"I saw a need and I took action," says KAMO Founder and President, Trent Leichter. "I wanted to focus on sporting dogs that needed rehomed. To date, we have adopted out 12 dogs." [kamoinc.org](http://kamoinc.org)





who's spent more time hunting Wisconsin's public lands than almost any other state, I can assure you that Mr. Witecha is telling the truth.

Timber production is alive and well when you get into the northern half of the state, and that means grouse numbers tend to stay pretty solid from year to year. Wisconsin also experiences a great woodcock migration, meaning that the chance for both species during an October trip is easy enough to come by.

National Forests and Wildlife Management Areas are well marked, but Wisconsin also offers thousands of tracts of private land that is open to public hunting through their Managed Forest Law Program. These parcels won't be covered in signage, so do your homework before entering. Once you do, you'll find an ample amount of land to hunt for upland opportunities.

## ANYONE LOOKING FOR A TRUE MIXED-BAG HUNT IN THE BEAUTIFUL, BIG-WOODS SETTING COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THE BADGER STATE.

An added bonus in grouse country, beyond timberdoodles, is ducks. If you want to spend the morning pondside waiting on some woodies or mallards, the opportunity to do so on public land is very easy to find, with the hunting surprisingly good. Anyone looking for a true mixed-bag hunt in the beautiful, big-woods setting could do a lot worse than the Badger State.

### WHAT ABOUT THE WEST?

You don't need a wide-ranging GSP to enjoy the West and all it offers the

upland hunter. Plenty of Midwestern and Eastern hunters make the long trip to big country to target the variety of upland species that can be found from the prairies to the high-country basins. States like Idaho are a bird hunter's dream. With roughly 34-million acres of public hunting land and a bevy of upland species to choose from, you could hunt a lifetime in the Gem State and not tread upon one percent of the available land.

Of course, you could also hit up Montana or Wyoming as well, which



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## DESTINATION: The Uplands



› Whatever bucket-list species you're interested in, it's available on public land somewhere. You just need to do your homework before hitting the road.

both rival Idaho in available space and species. Or, you could look further south to find quail opportunities that are open when those northern states' seasons have been closed for weeks. The hottest thing going in upland hunting right now is Arizona quail, with the state offering multiple species, hunting into February, and enough public land to accommodate all comers (nearly half of Arizona is public land).

The left half of the country offers opportunities throughout pretty much every state, right up until you hit the Pacific Ocean, which means you really can't go wrong if you're thinking big when it comes to planning a trip. But remember, with big country comes big responsibility. The logistics of a trip to the West will be different from Midwestern and Eastern forays. Proximity to motels, emergency veterinarian services, and just about anything you might need will be different. So plan accordingly, and understand what you're getting into before you go. **GD**

STEVE OEHLenschLAGER



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MARK ATWATER



FINDING  
MY  
SOCKS



GEORGIA  
BOBWWHITE

# QUAIL

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OPPORTUNITY TO HUNT THROUGH  
THE PINES. BY DURRELL L. SMITH



## FINDING MY SOCKS & GEORGIA BOBWHITE QUAIL

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**There never seems to be a shortage of naysayers who participate in quick quips about the lackluster pursuit of wild bobwhite quail in the Southeast.**

Maybe it's just me, but I imagine that there are a similar number of folks who can never find their socks after a good run through the washer and dryer. It is my theory that all the lost socks find their way to some interdimensional



MARK ATWATER



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wormhole inside the dryer that I have playfully named “the sock universe.” Or maybe some things are just plain old hard to find...

That being my pair of socks...and bobwhite quail.

Particularly in my home state of Georgia, there are as many doubts about the reclusive Mr. Bob as there are needles on the native *Pinus Palustris* that fill the lore of bygone days when old pointers slept on the porch until old men stepped across the threshold of a screen door, side-by-side gun in hand, ready for bobwhite blood on the leaves. As for those of us quail men who have been so fortunate as to put down a bird or two from the current offerings of public land, we enjoy enduring stories and embellishments of pin-up performances as lengthy and colorful as the day is long.

### GENTLEMEN BOB

There is a rich history of myth and lore here in Georgia. The old dog men of the Red Hills share rumors that there

is supposedly something good for the birds that comes from the red clay of the land between Albany and Tallahassee. Maybe that same clay is more nourishing for the human condition—an ailment for the woes of a long work week. Chasing bobwhites here demands a dog with the decadence and air of excellence and nobility; a dog that’s got good manners and enough grit to chart a fluid path through briars and brush.

Fairly large-ranging dogs with a sweeping range are most beneficial, as the landscape is relatively flat with openings interrupted periodically by wiregrass, pine trees, and new growth after prescribed fire. The vast expanses of public land often sit relatively close to plantations, so strategizing which WMAs to hunt according to their proximity to plantations is often key.

My own education and predilection for class shooting-dog work has come from observing the African American field-trialers and dog men who have welcomed me into that community, and have allowed me to observe the

➤ A pointer running between the pine trees in the South is an iconic sight to see. Here, the author’s young pointer, Vegas, points a covey of bobwhites.

introductory and finishing processes of bird dog training. Exposure to wild birds in that area means letting the dog train itself and make its own mistakes, and I often do not do so much as make a peep. There is a reason why they are called Gentlemen Bobs, as early season birds will typically hold and sit still for a mindful dog, but will not tolerate small mistakes. Creeping on birds is simply not an option for anyone seeking to actually put birds in the game bag.





➤ Author Durrell Smith, founder of *The Gun Dog Notebook* podcast, with his English pointer, Vegas.



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# FINDING MY SOCKS & GEORGIA BOBWHITE QUAIL

➤ Quail tend to run rather than flush, so a tight-holding pointing breed and a good flushing dog are a dynamic duo when hunting this species.

## PROPER EXECUTION

There is an artistry that is perfected when running a young dog on Georgia quail, and those picturesque moments of covey flushes truly come alive with proper execution of class dog work. Coveys will range in number anywhere from six to 15 birds, and oftentimes many young, early season birds will allow the hunter to walk in thoroughly kicking and shuffling before they get a half mind to get out of Dodge. The early season, from opening day in November through the end of December, is rife with opportunities to expose and mold a young dog on fairly frequent bird activity.

The WMAs are not forgiving on the soles, so do plan to cover significant amounts of ground before getting into a mess of birds. Contrary to the prevalence of plantation-style hunting, horses are few, and areas to ride them on public land are seldom available. It lends itself to foot traffic in most areas and a pair of brush pants or chaps is a must. Quail don't hang out in the open, and they are not going to make it easy for the hunter or the dog to get to them. I often look for the nastiest cover full of beggar's lice, briar thickets, and thorns as sharp as tacks. The pin-prick cover and bloody arms are just the validation necessary to let folks know they've done a hard day's work and gone the distance to wrangle birds.

You might catch the "loony" birds



in the early season, and the young'uns are most susceptible to predation and death by poor decision-making. More experienced birds hesitate to flush and often opt to run, so a tight-holding pointer and good flushing Labrador have been my choice combination.

There's good reason for folks in the South working pointers and flushing retrievers together. Human feet can't move a bird into flight like a spaniel or Lab can, and retrieving shot birds is a half-day's chore when the vegetation is still very thick.



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## ON THE FLUSH

When they do flush, I typically opt for shooting the captain of the crew—that one recall bird that goes left when the rest go right. I'll chase that lone flier until the third flush, if I can.

The bird tires himself out by then, and so much time will have passed that the other members of the covey may have found their way back to each other.

Heat and humidity have always been suffocating, and chilly mornings are the jests of a looming southern sun. That might last a while, as winter is never truly winter until around January, and dogs can burn out rather early. My days are split into parts, from first shooting light until around 11 a.m., and I head back out at two or three in the afternoon, hunting until an hour before sunset. I've made it a practice to give the leftover birds enough time before dark to find their way back to their

compatriots before the creatures of the night make a reaping of any runoffs.

To make the pursuit even more interesting, the birds are tough and don't always die upon impact. I've had a number of wounded birds shuffle and flutter ferociously under logs and crevices, struggling for the last defiant attempt at self-preservation while the rest of the covey disappears. After January, the birds are the worst about falling, so follow-up shots are impera-

tive. I got a dose of my own medicine after lurking around some dead logs from previous prescribed fire. We found, pointed, and flushed a pair, and I thought I'd downed one of the birds. In my haste, I assumed it fell and was close enough to pick up by hand. My young dog, Vegas, relocated and pointed it; because of this, I figured I had too much pointer with not enough sense. I just knew I hit that bird...

"Why inna world's this dog pointing

**AFTER JANUARY, THE BIRDS ARE THE WORST ABOUT FALLING, SO FOLLOW-UP SHOTS ARE IMPERATIVE.**

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## FINDING MY SOCKS & GEORGIA BOBWHITE QUAIL



➤ Hunting wild bobwhite quail in the South is a time-honored tradition and a must-do for uplanders.

a dead bird? Least he can do is fumble around with it and take some initiative.” Needless to say, I was very wrong and walked into the area with my gun’s action opened. I didn’t find a dead bird, and was instead left looking at the ass end of a deceptive quail taking back to flight. Maybe a pellet or two gave him some “sit down,” but my advance was enough to send him back into the piney abyss.

From January to the end of February, we work the surviving coveys. These birds are typically much wilier and much less willing to hold for very long. It’s great for challenging the dog, and you really get a chance to see the idyllic quivering 12 o’clock point. The cover is finally dead, and birds have much less room for error.

Hunting wild bobwhites in Georgia is a time-honored tradition, although numbers fluctuate from year to year. Of course, some years are better and more productive than others, but the long walks are always scenic and transcendent, and reveal the whispers and secrets of bygone years buried beneath the red clay.

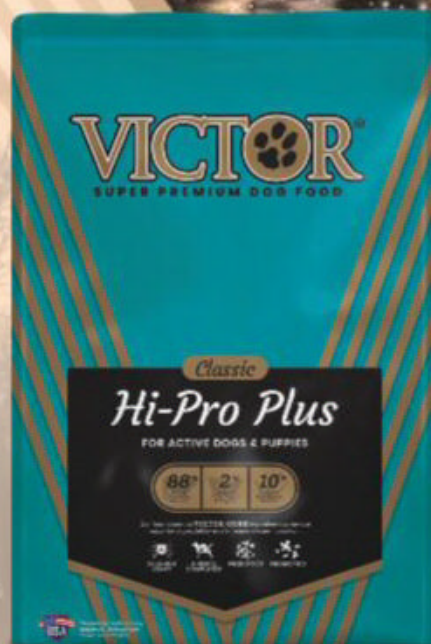
After a long day afield and a long drive home, I kick off my boots, thankful that I found those socks before I left the house and birds by the time I got back. It’d be about time to throw them back in the wash. They’ve seen around 12 miles since I left the truck. Lord knows I hope I can find them again—and I feel the same about the quail. **GD**



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# THE 9 TO 5 ER'S







# GUIDE TO

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# TRAVELING BIRD HUNTS

TWELVE HOURS BEHIND THE WHEEL, FUELED BY COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF COFFEE, NEXT TO A SNORING HUNTING BUDDY... ALL JUST TO CHASE THE NEXT FLUSH? WE COULDN'T THINK OF A BETTER WAY TO SPEND A WEEKEND. BY BEN BRETTINGEN





**I** It was Thursday evening and the plan was to drive from Mississippi to northwest Kansas for a long weekend of pheasant and quail hunting.

Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of living anywhere near prime upland ground and am relegated to taking one or two five-day trips, and as many long weekends as I can go without getting fired or kicked out of the house. Working a nine-to-five job is really the kicker, and only having two days to work with on a trip. After doing this for many years, I've learned a thing or two about maximizing time spent in the field and ways to make the long drive more bearable.

#### **SCHEDULING THE HUNT**

Time is the number-one limiting factor for my hunts, and the same can be said for many others. I don't have children, but it's no secret that the balance between fun, work, and family becomes a three-way seesaw, with the goal of achieving equilibrium being almost impossible. This leads to why my travels are often kamikaze three-day trips, keeping my wife and the boss man happy. This approach isn't for the faint



➤ Not everyone has the luxury of taking multiple days off work to hunt. Utilizing weekends is possible with a little planning.

---

of heart, and you will never show up back at the office saying, “I feel so rested from my vacation.” As a matter of fact, I’ve rolled into the office parking lot from more than one hunting trip at 6 a.m. on a Monday morning, taking a two-hour nap in the backseat, and rolling out of the truck into another work week.

Here’s the basic gist of what I’ll do on a three-day trip to Kansas, which takes me about 14 hours of chasing the white line:

**Thursday 1 p.m.–5 p.m.:**

Leave the house

**Friday 3 a.m.–7 a.m.:**

Arrive at hunting grounds

**Friday–Sunday 10 a.m.:**

Hunt

**Sunday 11 a.m.–1 p.m.:**

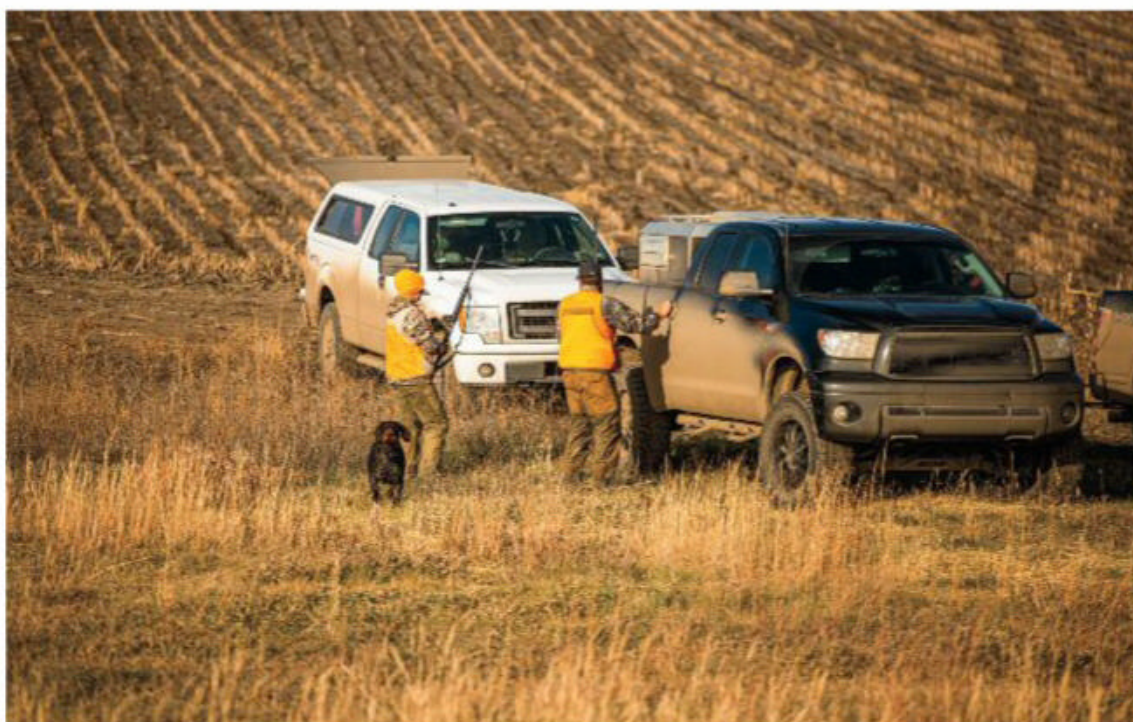
Depart for home

**Monday 1 a.m.–3 a.m.:**

Arrive home

Roughly 30 hours of travel to hunt about 25 hours. This math ends up looking a lot better if you’re closer to striking distance of your destination. In the words of Waylon Jennings, “I’ve always been crazy, but it keeps me from going insane!”

If this sounds like way too much travel, a great way to extend your time is using key holidays in the fall. One of my favorite, and much more “sane” trips, uses the short week of Thanksgiving. Spending time with family over the holidays is important, and odds are you’d be met with a little resistance if you flipped the bird to the in-laws.





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THROUGH THE MIDWEST'S  
TALL GRASS PRAIRIES. THIS  
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THE MOST POSSIBLE TIME  
IN THE FIELD...

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# THE 9 TO 5 ER'S GUIDE

I'll head out of town Friday night the week before Thanksgiving, taking off work the following Monday through Wednesday, which gives me 4.5 days of hunting. Normally, Wednesday morning includes a quick half-day hunt before returning just in time to eat a

little turkey and nod off watching football. Totally acceptable...right?

## LIFE ON THE HIGHWAY

One of the most daunting trips was a solo Arizona quail adventure back in 2019. I laid the hammer down after a

full day at the salt mine, drove 22 hours, and was able to chase Mearns the next afternoon. After making that trip, I really don't suggest taking my approach. But I've gained some valuable insight on the best ways to do it, after making a myriad of mistakes.

The buddy system is by far the best way to tackle my approach to travel. That solo drive to Arizona was brutal, and the mental fatigue caught up with me around Day Four. However, with a friend riding shotgun, you'll end up arriving far less "crispy."

What good are two people dog-tired upon arrival? It's the responsibility of the passenger to get enough sleep to take over the driving duties when the driver gets cross-eyed. I'm not advocating you drive to the point of nodding off and playing bumper cars with the rumble strips, but we're adults, and you know when you're too tired to be a safe driver. Pull off at a gas station, get your caffeine fix, and switch up with your rested buddy. Instead of both people getting no sleep, each person gets at least a half-night's rest. It not only saves a ton of time, but also saves you the cost of a hotel room for two hours of sleep. I've hit the point on several solo trips where exhaustion is inevitable, and you need to sleep. In this situation, just pull over in a Walmart or truck stop parking lot and set a phone timer for an hour to give you a little boost to keep pounding the pavement.

Because you have such a short time to hunt, it's also important that you don't dilly dally. Here are a few tips to save time when you're on the road:

Only stop when you need gas. If you ever watch your GPS on a long road trip, it's hard to get to your destination before the original ETA. It would kill your progress if you had to stop every time you needed to hit the restroom, grab a snack, and let the dogs out. Combine these stops together, and you will get to your destination much faster.

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► Camping saves money, but your truck bed is taken up by gear and dogs on short hunting trips. Split the cost of a cheap hotel so you're rested for long days of hunting.

Sitting down and eating a meal means less time you're in the field. For every hour spent on the highway, I can save about five minutes on the GPS, and for every gas stop, I lose 10 to 15 minutes. If you end up stopping seven different times, you've just added almost two hours to your trip.

Traveling with dogs is another aspect that requires planning. Whether it be kennels in the back of the truck, a dog trailer, or a backseat full of hounds, it's important to have a plan. Even though my dogs primarily ride in the backseat, I always have kennels back there. Behind the driver's seat there's a bowl, a gallon of water, and leashes. I pick my gas stops based on having a good area to let the dogs relieve themselves. Although, it was quite interesting traveling through West Texas looking for an area with grass. We ended up settling on a rocky cactus flat. I also don't feed the dogs within a couple hours of leaving, opting to feed them four to five hours before we reach our destination and start hunting.

For many, this may seem like a terrible way to travel, but it's by far the

most efficient. Just keep thinking about that first covey rise, or a big rooster blowing up in your face—it'll give you some motivation!

### WHERE TO GO?

Let's say you're from the Great Lakes region and want to take your first trip to South Dakota for an epic DIY pheasant hunt. Where do you even begin? First, one of the best resources to get in the right area is Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever's Hunting Forecasts. They compile data for 23 states on the pheasant side, and 29 states for the quail forecast, and it's a great tool to get you into the right region within a state. There are so many variables that can alter bird numbers, and just because your next-door neighbor had a great hunt in an area five years ago doesn't mean the area could be almost devoid of birds this season. Next, it's time to get on the onX Hunt app (subscription required) and start finding large chunks of public land, or areas with a higher density of public land within the areas you've identified.

Once I've found areas that look birdy



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from above, I'll start breaking down my days in detail, so I'll have a starting plan. I mark access points and likely bird haunts on my app, and then label them something like Day1A, Day1B, Day1C. I'll also mark areas with different types of cover before I leave, because if my initial strategy doesn't work out, I'll have a fallback plan and won't waste valuable time scratching my head looking for spots. The last thing is, when arriving at a spot, try to drive around the piece of land to get a feel if it will hold birds. The last thing I want to do is walk around a giant tract of public land for a half day, only to realize there's nothing around.

If I walk two to three diverse, birdy looking spots in the first day and am not able to locate many birds, I'll make a 40- to 50-mile jump to a new area in hopes of finding greener pastures.

## SLEEPING LIKE A BABY

What's the best way to go for finding a place to rest your head? I've found the way to go is finding some borderline "no-tell" motel in smaller towns near the hunting grounds. I prefer this over camping for several reasons. The first is the amount of gear to camp for two people is just too much to fit in a short-bed truck with a topper that's already loaded with hunting gear and two or three dogs. I've done it before, but unless you're hyper-organized, it can be too much. The biggest reason I opt for a local



motel is because I'll be able to sleep in a warm bed and take a hot shower, so I can wake up and be ready to rock.

### GEAR & ORGANIZATION

Having the right gear and keeping it organized is a game-changer for these Blitzkrieg trips. There are a few pieces of equipment that would be hard to live without. The first is a camper top, or topper, for your pickup. You're able to keep the dogs and all your gear out of the elements, as well as greatly expand your storage area. Having an SUV also works fantastic—well, at least until your dog gets nailed by a skunk.

The second game-changer is a truck-bed organizer such as the DECKED

system. These drawers do come with a hefty price tag, so I opted to go the DIY route and saved some serious coin with about the same functionality. It has compartments for shotguns, ammo, vests, boots, dog gear, and tools, making it easy to keep everything in place. A small propane camp stove is another great and small addition to the arsenal, and holy smokes is a hot ham-and-cheese sandwich a morale booster after a tough morning in the field.

### ROAD WHEELS

There are a few things that will ruin a trip in a hurry—either leaving you with an empty wallet, or late for work on Monday morning.



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His thoughts on English Setters: like an over-under: graceful, but without passions. As to all other dogs: kind of like an Iver Johnson; you would only use one if you had nothing else to hunt with.

There was one exception. To him, an Irish Setter Gun Dog was like a well-worn double: comfortable and sweet in your hands and joyful at your shoulder. We believe that Granddad was right and to that end, have been breeding Irish Setter Gun Dogs for over 25 years. Those of you who follow field trials know the Celtic Red Setters: only Celts have ever won an Open All Breed Championship...and they did it twice.

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Vehicle maintenance is so important, and that fact cannot be understated. The severe mental exhaustion caused by straining your ears wondering, “Has the engine always sounded like that?” or “Is it getting ready to blow?” is not worth it.

I had a reliable, decked-out hunting truck that would get me from Points A to B and back without a second thought. That was until she met her demise at 180,000 miles via a deer to the grille on the way back from a Minnesota grouse hunt one late-October morning. I finally found the replacement truck I was looking for: A diesel with 25,000 miles, almost brand new! With just 24 hours to spare before taking off on our annual Thanksgiving Kansas trip, I was happy it all worked out. A check-engine light just outside of Wichita was the first indication something was awry, and when I rolled into Hays, Kansas, temps had dipped into the teens, and nothing but cold air was rolling out of the vents. After spending much of the next morning at the dealership, I was

sent off with four gallons of coolant and a warranty claim. I was so distracted by the truck, worrying about the next time it was going to head into “limp mode,” that it was hard to enjoy the trip. Be sure to give your four-wheeled friend a little love, because the last place you want her to exact her revenge is on some Midwest dirt road.

I love nothing more than following my dogs through the Midwest’s tall grass prairies. This travel system gives me the most possible time in the field, while still being able to show up for work on Monday morning. Hey, they say showing up is half the battle. They never said what kind of condition you’d have to be in! **GD**



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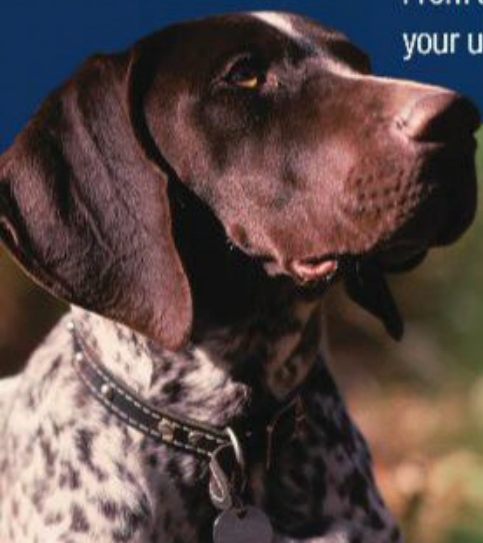
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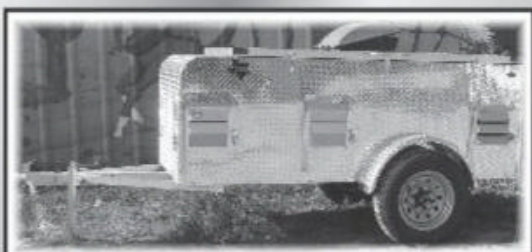
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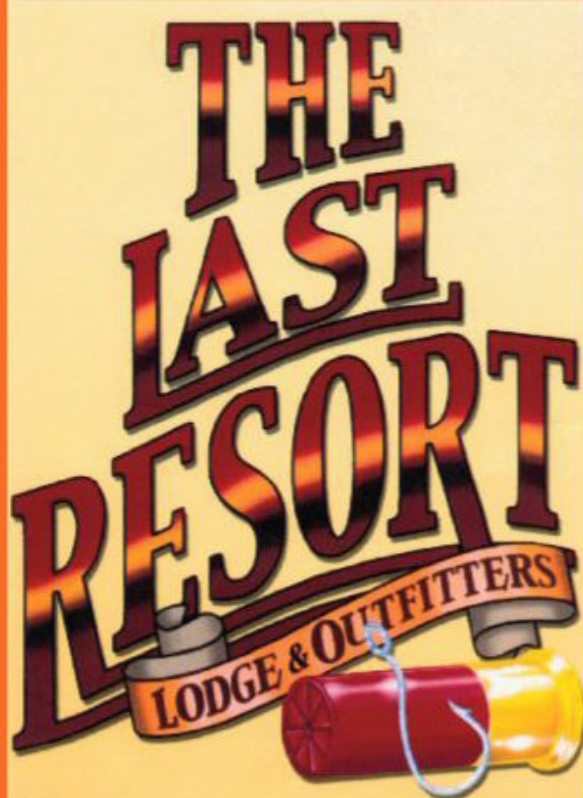
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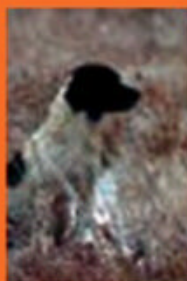
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BY GORDY J. KRAHN



SEAN DELONAS

# The Yard Stick

**I**'VE heard it said that every hunter gets one exceptional dog in his or her lifetime that is a far cut above the rest—the yardstick against which all those before and those to follow are measured. That dog might be defined by its hunting ability—the birdiest of birdy dogs, one that excelled in the field. Or maybe by its personality—the consummate companion and travel-mate, loyal and affectionate to a fault. Or maybe it was that first pup, one that arrived during a period in your life when time was an abundant commodity. Whatever made that dog special and set the bar on its highest rung, embodied the certainty that there would never be another to best it.

Ruckus was not that dog.

My sixth in a rather long sequence of American Brittanys, Ruckus was a unique dog in many ways. His most defining characteristic, though, was his social awkwardness—his personality the very demarcation of “aloof.” Those friends who had the pleasure of hunting over him might even describe him as antisocial. Ruckus never met a person he didn’t distrust, and while he was hunting, he was all business. Pats and praise were distractions from his constant focus: Getting a nose full of the next grouse or quail or pheasant. But in reality, he was one of the most intelligent, affectionate, and loyal dogs I have ever partnered up with. Ruckus was a talented hunter, and my heart would

swell with pride when my hunting companions praised his bird work. But what other people never saw was his true personality—his humor, his devotion, his love of life. These hidden gems were for my eyes only.

I’m convinced it was a long history of health issues that shaped his disposition, and the reason for his social clumsiness around people and other dogs. His vulnerability put him on constant guard that bordered on fearful

his brace-mate, Rebel, covered ground like a pair of Kirby vacuum cleaners as they combed the countryside searching for birds.

Ruckus was dealt a tough hand, but he was always a fighter, working through physical disabilities and emotional difficulties all of his life. Unfortunately, he met his match in the lung bug that took his life. He fought the good fight, but in the end it wasn’t enough, and I had to say goodbye to a best friend.

Each hunting dog comes with its talents and deficiencies firmly attached that combine to make them unique. Ruckus was no different—and I happily took the bad with the good.

I waited more than a year to replace Ruckus, which in itself is a testament to the great loss I felt. When I finally told a good hunting buddy I was putting another pup on the ground, he gave me a reality check. “Just how many dogs do you think you have left in you?” he asked. Ouch!

The short answer is that as long as my legs hold out, I’ll be following a pair of these bodacious Britts wherever their noses lead them—maybe just to see if a new “yardstick” comes along. **GD**

**RUCKUS WAS A UNIQUE DOG IN MANY WAYS. HIS MOST DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC, THOUGH, WAS HIS SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS...**

aggression. He contracted parvo as a pup, and later suffered from Addison’s disease, chronic eye infections, and several broken teeth (don’t ask). And it was likely a long succession of trips to the vet to be constantly poked and prodded where he gained a wariness of strangers. But through it all he survived and developed into a fine, albeit socially handicapped, gun dog.

Ruckus and I traveled to seven states during his nine seasons with me, including a bucket-list trip to Utah for blue grouse, and I can’t tell you how many birds we tag-teamed. We took seven road trips his last fall, and Ruckus ran hard and strong. Even in his waning years, he was still a rock star. He and

...

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